

Administration 101: The Honeymoon May Be Brief

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Image: Kevin Van Aelst

On her first day of work, a dean got a call from the provost of her new university. He asked her to act immediately on a matter "too long put off" — firing the director of a badly run research center. The university had built a strong case — perennially low performance and financial mismanagement — but the departing dean hadn't wanted to leave with blood on his hands. So the new dean dutifully pulled the trigger.

It turned out that the center's director — while abjectly unfit — was also extremely popular. And so a firestorm erupted among the college's faculty members. By the dean's estimation, her honeymoon lasted half a day.

Ideally, as a new chair, dean, provost, or president, you will be granted a grace period to begin enacting your promised agenda before we start doubting your leadership. In practice, you may encounter roadblocks — some common to all academic leaders and some localized — that will end your honeymoon much sooner than you expected.

The [Admin 101 series](#), on leadership in higher education, looks at how to become an academic administrator and how to survive and thrive in the job. This month's column is about how to get off to a good start.

Do a reconnaissance mission. As soon as you've said yes, start trying to ascertain what immediate issues you might be up against. Before I took office as a dean, and in the first few weeks afterward, I spent a lot of time fact-finding. My goal: to determine if any crises demanded big decisions right away.

I learned that I would be facing major challenges — including the nature and cost of the college's commitment to online education and the imminent rollout of a revised budget model. But none of those things forced me into action without planning and deliberation. I also had some "big ideas," but, again, none of them would fail if adopted six months later rather than in my second week.

In short, my honeymoon lasted more than just a few hours. I had time to learn more, gain trust, get to know people, let them size me up, build consensus, and assign priorities.

Not everyone is so lucky. Many a new administrator arrives as a self-styled architect (a leader with a grand design for the future), only to find that what is needed is a plumber (a manager to react to urgent messes). Often the crises are financial: The place is bleeding money, has been overspending, or is facing budget cuts.

If the hiring institution has been honest, those issues will not be a surprise to you. But even if they are, quitting is (presumably) not an option. So you might have to accept that your honeymoon is going to be short because (and I'll devote more attention to this in a future column) the saying that "every dollar has a constituency" is as true in a college of engineering as it is in Congress.

Listen, don't preach. The chief of staff of my college is a renowned horse trainer, and many of the insights she gained working with her quirky, powerful charges are equally applicable to humans in a workplace. A plaque in my office displays one of her observations: "Horses don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Indeed, as a teacher I always found that the first step to persuading students to learn the material was to persuade them that I cared about their education and their future.

In contrast, many administrators stumble because they make the fatal mistake of thinking they can — through a display of sheer brilliance — win over the faculty (not to mention staff, students, alumni, and trustees). The first problem with that tactic: Every campus is filled with professors from the A-student, high-scoring cohort of life. In my 25 years as an academic, I have never heard a faculty member say, "Our dean is so much smarter than I am. He must be right!"

The second hitch in the "IQ and awe" tactic is that people will question your motives. They will wonder: Are you asking us to revise the curriculum because it will help students, or because it will look good on your CV for your next move up the leadership ladder?

Use this honeymoon period to meet with everyone you can, individually or in small groups. Don't preach or lay out an expansive vision. Hear people out, ponder, consider, ask follow-up questions, connect dots, map patterns. Then go back and meet with them again. Explore your new world and its citizens and try to show that you want the best for all of them.

Take small steps. In your first few months on the job, make decisions on some easy issues while planning for the difficult ones. You don't want to scare people off with too much change too soon, since you don't fully understand the politics of the place yet.

An acquaintance started as president of a small regional campus of a state university. In her first week, she learned that she, an outsider, had been chosen over the "hometown boy," a faculty member who had served there for 30 years. His partisans were "still reeling" and apparently were set on doing everything they could to ruin her. Within a year she'd stepped down, frustrated at the toxicity around her and the unwillingness of the central administration to back her up whenever there was controversy.

That sort of melodrama is pervasive in higher education: Leaders are hired to be "change agents," but when they try to enact change, they are not supported, and they fail.

In my own first month or two as a dean, I found hundreds of small, uncontroversial decisions I could make that had been delayed for my arrival — not because someone was passing the buck but as a courtesy to me, the new leader. So I focused on the small stuff and asked various lieutenants and faculty committees to start gathering data and making recommendations on the big stuff. I set out to establish priorities for the next semester, the next year, the next five years. I spent yet more time discussing and revising those priorities.

The goal here is not just to check items off a list but to establish a sense of progress and momentum. You're sending a message: We are moving forward — together.

Don't criticize your predecessor. Hindsight makes us feel wise. Faculty and staff members may tempt you to lambast the previous regime. You may hear things like, "The previous director didn't care about research" or "Our last provost did not respect faculty governance." And so on.

Don't join in the booing. First, you don't know enough about the place yet to distinguish whether some past decision was the wrong one. Every decision that administrators make involves trade-offs. There is no such thing as a perfect resolution.

Second, the past and the present are not necessarily comparable. As I like to say in my own case, "The previous dean made the best decisions for his time; I just want to make the best decisions for my time."

Third, know this: After you are gone, people will complain about you to your successor.

So no matter how bad the situation, insist that your job is to enact modern, reasonable, sustained solutions, not debate history. Your honeymoon should be a positive interval; don't let it get bogged down in recriminations.

Most people on any campus want to give the new leader a chance. But nobody gets a free pass forever. Long or short, your honeymoon is a key period to get settled, gain wisdom, and set a course for the successful tenure you hope will ensue. The key factor is that even if you are viewed favorably, you are under scrutiny, especially if you are an outsider. Now, in your first months, is the time to establish your credentials as a partner in progress.