

How to Align Your Leadership Team in Troubled Times

Susan M. Snyder and Melody Rose, Ph.D.

Change is always with us, even in tradition-bound academe. But its velocity seems to be accelerating on college campuses against a backdrop of economic, political, and enrollment uncertainties, and, perhaps most concerning, a loss of public faith in the very value of higher education. For college presidents, it's difficult to survive in this environment, much less thrive.

Of course the best leaders are not satisfied with mere survival — they want a legacy of positive impact. Thriving in a presidency in disruptive times demands a steady eye on the future, along with a willingness to define and move toward it. And doing that requires a cohesive leadership team who can help you anticipate and navigate a shifting landscape.

As executive search and leadership consultants, we see many presidents make careful decisions in hiring and assembling their cabinets. However, we also see too many presidents who don't look beyond the individuals to consider the team as a whole and ask: Is my team as aligned as it needs to be? For today's presidents (and for those in the pipeline), we have some advice on how to make sure your team is working well — as a team.

The right mix of people. Given the monumental and existential crises facing higher education, presidents should already be asking themselves some basic questions about their cabinets. For example:

- Do I have leaders in place with the discipline, persistence, and influence necessary to impart

meaningful change? Can they pivot and revise our strategy as we work through problems?

- How well can they manage budgets in a resource-scarce environment? Can they make difficult choices to ensure the reputation and long-term viability of our institution?
- While my team may have the technical skills to manage disruption, do they have the emotional fortitude? Do they have the personal resilience and agility to operate in an environment of great change?
- Do team members have the skills and experience to succeed in a landscape that will be different from the one they know? Are they willing to leave their comfort zone, realizing that “what got them here, won't get them there?”
- Do we have the right mix of leadership and talent to simultaneously manage the present and transform the campus for the future?

So the right mix of leaders is important. For you and your institution to thrive, you also need your team to be aligned in three key areas.

No. 1: Collective priorities. Every administrator on your team tends to be crystal clear on the priorities of their particular turf. And they're usually pretty clear on the “must-win battles” and the overall strategic priorities, especially if they're preparing for or just finishing up with strategic planning or a board retreat.

Things get a lot grayer when it comes to understanding what they must collectively prioritize — especially when those institutional goals mean individual priorities have to be delayed, canceled, or otherwise negatively affected. The “decision rights” — in management jargon: who gets a say on the trade-offs — are usually implicit. The result: Everyone has a different expectation of how decisions are made, leading to frustration when their expectations aren’t met.

Each administrator on your team tends to believe — understandably — that their priorities are most important. But adding up all of their individual goals makes for a very long and insurmountable to-do list.

That approach is known as vertical thinking. The aim of decision making on your leadership team should be horizontal thinking, with cabinet members considering the needs of the enterprise, not just their particular unit. To make that happen:

- First, do the work of clarifying the most critical priorities for the institution. This work is best accomplished outside of the routine team meeting. Sometimes getting off-site, and working together in a sustained, focused way can be clarifying and energizing. While this can be strategic planning, it can happen in a day-long retreat if the purpose is laid out clearly in advance.
- Second, decide how you want to leverage the team as a whole to work on collective priorities. Do you want the full cabinet to make decisions, including those controversial trade-off decisions about which things get supported and which don’t? Or do you simply want their input and counsel on specific topics, with the actual decisions handled by a smaller subgroup? There isn’t a “right answer” here: it depends very much on your particular context and strategy, your institution’s expectations for shared governance and decision-making, your leadership style, and your team.

Clarifying priorities and implications for the entire team essentially creates a “job description” for the team and defines the often-fuzzy role of “cabinet member” or

“executive leadership team member.” Clarity on a vice president’s or a dean’s “day job” doesn’t unleash the power of the team’s collective intelligence; they need to understand the role they play as a member of your cabinet. Working with your team to make this part of their job description clear creates a common understanding that, once established, enables faster and more effective decision-making.

No. 2: Collective behavior. For horizontal thinking to make a difference, your team must learn to act more horizontally, too.

Culturally, that can be a big shift. Many cabinet members and departmental leaders are accustomed to one-on-one meetings with the president, during which the only topic is their turf and their priorities. In those meetings, they tend to “play it safe,” focusing on positives and progress and downplaying challenges or serious issues. They prefer not to look across the campus toward issues that overlap or conflict with the interests of other administrators.

In a more horizontal, team-driven world, however, each leader should be expected and celebrated for speaking honestly, seeking advice and help from leadership peers, working across departments, and supporting one another.

The president can model and encourage such behavior. Workshops or retreats can be an effective way to establish new team habits and behaviors. Executives should spend time to better understand one another both as leaders and as human beings. Team members can commit to more frequent, informal discussions with one another to deepen interpersonal understanding and deepen the connections begun in team off-sites. To encourage horizontal behavior, and cross-pollination of ideas and relationships, consider:

- Inviting leaders to attend meetings “outside their lane.” For example, encourage the vice president of advancement to attend a student affairs meeting, and to actively participate.
- Offering facilitated workshops and retreats that get people out of their routines and encourage fresh

ways of understanding and collective problem-solving.

- Taking different configurations of colleagues out for coffee. Don't fall into the habit of convening only by department or "sector."

No. 3: Communication. Human beings are wired to pay attention to social dynamics: Noticing and adjusting to signals sent (often unconsciously) by those "in power" meant the difference between life and death in days of old. Today, as institutions face job losses or restructuring, people pay attention to every administrative pronouncement. Change in times like these is scary even for those who typically enjoy it. When people have their antennae on alert to pick up the faintest whiff of conflict, the need for effective communication increases.

All too often, however, various campus leaders send messages that are slightly – or significantly – different in content or tone. The differences get noticed and interpreted as misalignment on the leadership team. People start to compare notes and a dangerous cycle begins: Everyone spends more time trying to figure out what's happening in the senior ranks than on driving positive outcomes for the institution.

The power dynamic is different, but the same phenomenon occurs between the board and the leadership team. When members of your cabinet interact with the board, are they hitting on similar themes? Are they demonstrating awareness of institutional priorities, and clarity on how they support those goals both individually and collectively?

Trustees pick up on signs of alignment (or misalignment) – during formal board meetings and, even more so, during informal chatter. The board notices. Alignment builds confidence and support; misalignment breeds doubt and skepticism. Where information is incomplete or inconsistent, the human brain tends to fill the gap with their worries, which is not a helpful development in times of great change.

Once your team has done the work on setting collective priorities and understanding their implications for how the team members spend their time and interact,

aligning on communication is fairly straightforward. One president we know takes 30 minutes, at the end of long meetings, to ask the team three questions:

- What did we decide?
- What are our next steps (who, what, by when)?
- What will we communicate?

That sort of habit ensures alignment, execution, and the ability to truly communicate with one voice. It gives cabinet members a chance to speak – not only to their own priorities and how they affect the organization, but also to other leaders' priorities. They get a chance to demonstrate confidence in one another, and in the power of the team.

As president, with so many complicated problems on your plate, you may be thinking: I don't have time for team development. But in fact, doing the work of alignment with your team turns out to be more important in difficult times than in periods of stability, because it accelerates decision-making and execution. It builds muscle, too, enabling administrators to understand their roles within the context of the enterprise, to appreciate the roles of others, and to make decisions quickly. These muscles are also required to execute strategy, accelerate growth, and embrace innovation.

Finally, interacting differently with your team reaps an unexpected benefit for you: It makes the lonely job of president far less isolated. You're not alone; you are on a team of people who have one another's backs. Taking the time to get this alignment right – especially in the three key areas outlined here – enables the speed that your organization must demonstrate to move from surviving to thriving.

Susan M. Snyder is an Executive Partner in the Leadership Advisory of WittKieffer. Melody Rose, Ph.D. is a Principal in the Leadership Advisory and Executive Search solutions for the firm.

This article was originally published by the Chronicle of Higher Education. Permission to reprint has been granted.