The Precariously Unique Role of the President’s Assistant During the Presidential Search Process

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ACCORDING TO JEFF HOCKADAY AND DONALD E. PUYEAR, UP TO HALF OF THE community colleges across the country will be experiencing a presidential search within the next ten years. “Studies, both empirical and formal, indicate that retirement and turnover among America’s community college leadership in the near future will have a serious impact. As many as 600 of the slightly more than 1,200 community college presidents in the United States could retire during the next decade,” say Hockaday and Puyear, authors of the article Community College Leadership in the New Millennium, which appears on ACCT’s website. For someone who serves in the capacity of the administrative assistant to the president or a similar position, going through the search process for the person who will one day be their next boss can seem like a daunting task. In reality, however, it is a unique opportunity to showcase the skills that lead them down this particular career path in the first place. They just have to be able to move beyond their own anxieties.

In any position in any institution, the prospect of getting a new boss can be intimidating and brings with it many questions. What will this new person be like? Will we get along? What kind of changes will they implement when they arrive? For the person or persons in the role of the president’s assistant(s), an additional question lurks: Will they want to replace me with their current assistant?

Having personally assisted with a presidential search within the last two years, I understand the origin and stress-inducing power of all of these questions. When I attended my first ACCT Annual Congress a few years ago, I eagerly took part in the half-day workshop facilitated by the Professional Board Staff Network (PBSN). One of the workshop topics was presented by a community college president and his assistant. He discussed the role of the presidential assistant from the viewpoint of a president, offering valuable insight and information on specific needs of a CEO. The president and his assistant shared how they navigated their roles and the importance of having a strong, trusting relationship. Though I don’t remember everything that was discussed, I do remember finding the session extremely beneficial, being the newbie that I was.

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There was one thing that was said, however, that I have not forgotten to this day. The community college president stated that the position of the presidential assistant is one of the most precarious on campus when it comes time for that president to transition to a new institution. Because the relationship between a president and his or her assistant is so valuable, and is hopefully honed to perfection over the years, the ideal scenario when leaving one institution for another would be for the president to bring his or her personal assistant with them, the president said. This particular president added that he was close to retirement, but that if he instead chose to transition to another institution, he would do everything in his power to convince his current assistant to make the move as well.

Those words have never really left me, and they edged their way to the forefront of my thoughts when it became apparent that my institution would be searching for a new president. Added to that memory over the several months it took to complete the search process was the same frequently asked question posed by random staff members: “Do you think the new president will keep you when they are hired?” “I certainly hope they decide to do so,” was all that I could politely answer.

Being replaced or relocated by an incoming president is not something that you consciously think about when you apply for a position such as this, and it’s not something that anyone really warns you about ahead of time. Though I’ve been told several times since my early days on the job that this practice isn’t as prevalent as it might once have been in the past, I do know now that it is always a possibility.

Having all of these concerns going through my mind, I also understood, however, that during the search process, it was imperative that I continue to serve my current president, the board, and my institution to the best of my abilities in order to ensure a smooth and successful transition process. There was too much to be accomplished in terms of the search process itself and performing my regular day-to-day duties to allow anxieties to get in the way.

After having successfully completed this process myself, I realized how important my role as the executive assistant to the president was to the institution’s quest for its next leader. If the president’s assistant also serves the board of trustees, as I do, he or she can be a valuable asset to the trustees during the search process. There are so many components of the presidential search that need to be addressed, from organizing meeting logistics, communicating with members of search committees and search firms, communicating with the candidates themselves, organizing travel, and making sure everyone is fed, to name a few, which can adeptly be handled by the president’s assistant if called upon to help. The board of trustees depends on this person at this time more than ever. It is yet another opportunity for the president’s assistant to display their skills and competence. They also could potentially be called upon to give input throughout the process without overstepping their bounds.

Once the presidential candidates enter the picture, the chances arise for the assistant to showcase their abilities and work ethic to each candidate, among whom is the one who will be his or her future boss. Keeping in mind that the candidates will be nervous, and that the interview process is both daunting and momentous for each of them, the assistant has the opportunity to help make their experiences as easy as possible.

After the final selection is made and the offer is given, the real communication with the future president begins, often weeks before they step into their new role. This advance work will give the assistant the unique occasion to prove his or her value to the position, and to begin to build the relationship of trust that will hopefully perpetuate for years down the road.

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“WISH WE COULD TURN BACK TIME/ TO THE GOOD OLD DAYS/ when our momma sang us to sleep/ but now we’re stressed out…” So go the lyrics to one of the most popular songs of 2016, “Stressed Out” by the group Twenty One Pilots, which laments the many pressures the transition to adulthood brings.

Stress is a normal human response to danger. In some cases, it can motivate people to prepare or perform better, and it can even be life-saving in some situations. If stress goes on for too long, however, it can have serious effects on physical and mental health. It can affect immune, digestive, sleep, and reproductive systems, causing them to stop working normally. Stress can even lead to depression, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and other illnesses.

According to the Integrated Benefits Institute (IBI), a health and productivity research organization, lost productivity from illness costs the U.S. economy some $227 billion a year, including employee absenteism and what researchers called “presenteeism,” when employees report to work but illness keeps them from performing at their best.

One in four Americans is affected by mental illness each year, and the World Health Organization says depression will be the costliest disease burden by 2020. When it comes to mental health, IBI’s research has shown a strong relationship between workplace climate, employee health, and work outcomes such as absence and job performance.

Numerous studies show that the greatest sources of stress for Americans are job-related. In today’s over-connected world, finding a balance between work and everything else seems like an impossible task. So how does one combat these stressors in order to stay healthy and perform at their best?

**Prioritize** at work and at home. At work, set manageable goals and focus on quality rather than quantity. Breaking larger projects into smaller tasks makes them seem more realistic, gives a greater sense of control, and allows for a greater sense of accomplishment and progress. Creating a to-do list can help prioritize more urgent and important items and keep you on track. Note what you have accomplished at the end of the day, not what you have been unable to do. At home, prioritize by allowing yourself to “unplug” from work. Recognize the need for personal time. For most of us, our productivity and effectiveness is tied to the speed of our thinking. Without enough rest, thinking slows down considerably.

**Communicate.** Learn to say no to new tasks if they are putting you into overload. Be honest with colleagues or your boss when you feel you’re in a bind. But don’t just complain — suggest practical alternatives. Be realistic about what you can and can’t accomplish in a day. It’s not helpful if you take on too much and then chastise yourself for not getting it done. To reduce stress, seek help from friends, family, and community organizations.

Make time for **self-care.** In addition to eating properly, exercising regularly, and getting enough sleep, take the time to do the things that you enjoy. Find what helps you cope with stress, whether it be meditation and yoga, connecting with friends, watching TV, reading, cooking, or getting a massage. Many organizations offer an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), which assists employees with personal and work-related issues, including guidance on emotional well-being, as well as referrals to mental health and other services.

Don’t let stress stand in the way of your health and happiness. If you are persistently overwhelmed, it may be time to seek help from a mental health professional. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness — taking care of yourself is a sign of strength. Also important is to give yourself a break. No one’s perfect! Instead of focusing on your shortcomings, acknowledge your success, allow yourself to be human, and just do the best you can.

**Schedule** your time at work and at home. Although it can be challenging, by blocking off time for breaks at work, you are giving yourself the opportunity to recharge throughout the day. You can also prevent stressful situations from overlapping, reducing the number of stressors you must juggle at any one time. If possible, stagger deadlines for large projects. This strategy also translates to home life. By treating family time as a scheduled commitment, you are able to be intentional about your priorities.

The ACCT Professional Board Staff Network takes a strong interest in the health of our members. At the recent PBSN professional development workshop, held during the 2016 ACCT Leadership Congress, an informative session was provided on ways to stay healthy despite the largely sedentary working conditions of most professional board staff.

At the end of the day, there is no panacea for relieving stress. Each individual must identify his or her own stressors and take action to address them. You get to decide what balance means to you. While we would all prefer to return to a more carefree time, the very important work we do supporting our boards, CEOs, and ultimately, community college students helps to give people the tools to change their lives.

Using these tips, hopefully you will be able to restore a little balance in your own life. As the late businessman and writer Paul Boese once said, “We come into this world head first and go out feet first; in between, it is all a matter of balance.”