

Bad Advice

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The term “seduction of the leader” was introduced to me more than 25 years ago by my colleague Rod Napier, who has written a book on the subject. The term describes an insidious leadership dynamic that is played out on campuses across the country.

This form of seduction occurs when presidents and other senior leaders don’t receive honest and thoughtful feedback about the impact of their leadership style or ideas. Followers tend to avoid “telling it like it is” for a variety of reasons. The unfortunate consequence of this dynamic is leaders who are isolated, ill-informed, and often downright clueless.

Followers often have difficulty speaking truth to power, for a wide variety of reasons. Followers may lack either the courage or the skill to approach a president with a negative or contradictory message. They may have excessive respect for the unique role of the president as the representative of “the institution” and all that entails: status, history, and politics. The president may not really be open to differing opinions or the ideas of others -- and everyone knows it. There may have been negative consequences when someone was honest and direct with the president, creating a culture of avoidance and reluctance among those who should be providing honest feedback.

Case Studies in Seduction

Three examples will help unpack the seduction dynamic.

A year ago I met with a brand new president and her informal “kitchen cabinet.” Although she also had an official cabinet, it was clear the informal advisers were the ones who helped the new president develop ideas, shape policy, and make decisions.

In the initial stages of this president’s transition I was asked for my advice regarding the delicate process of transitioning a new leader. I was sought out for these conversations because I had co-authored a book on presidential transitions and knew a few things about the topic. During the two meetings we had, the members of the kitchen cabinet agreed with everything the president said about what she wanted to do during her first year. Much of it made sense to me, but there were some things I had serious reservations about. When I provided counter-advice or offered a different opinion, I was quickly shot down. Anything I said that was contrary to what the president wanted was dismissed out of hand. This was puzzling because no one in the group had ever been part of a presidential transition before, but that did not matter. What the president wanted, she got, with the full support of those supposedly advising her.

The advisers were clearly highly intelligent and engaging individuals, but they were not serving their president well. The president went forward with her plans and experienced several rocky periods in that initial year, which caused her real problems with the faculty. These missteps could easily have been avoided if only she had listened to different advice.

Recently, I received a call from this same president to discuss strategic planning on her campus. Although I was surprised by the call, given our past exchanges, I agreed to a phone conference to discuss the planning process and possible options. Once again, the strange dynamic occurred whenever I gave an opinion the president wasn’t fond of. The kitchen cabinet reacted as if I were daft and didn’t know what I was talking about. They attacked my rationale, questioned my experience, and were generally rude to me. The president had clear and strong ideas -- albeit uninformed ones -- about how she wanted to conduct strategic planning. Any ideas to the contrary were dismissed, and her advisers wholeheartedly supported her.

This president is experiencing seduction by sycophants.

With another president, the seduction took on a different form.

This experienced and successful president inherited an institution that has been rolling slowly downhill for a decade. The faculty is aging rapidly and growing less productive; the endowment is anemic; student-centeredness is talked about but not lived; the brand is unfocused and relatively unknown. And the more agile competition is beginning to encroach quickly on this institution's territory.

The institution needs vitality, clarity, and focus. Tough decisions need to be made. The incoming president -- a seasoned veteran -- can contribute mightily in many ways. He has passion, energy, vision, and great ideas. He is known as a "decider" who gets results.

Unfortunately, campus stakeholders have a long list of demands for the new president. They want him to cure the pervasive complacency; bring focus, clarity, and hope to the campus; rebuild the academic excellence of the faculty as quickly as possible; and, oh by the way, raise a hundred million dollars for the endowment.

This president has been captured by the unrealistic expectations of his followers and has convinced himself he can pull everything off. He puts in 15-hour days, six days a week, as he tries to push the institution forward with his aspiration and perspiration. A president can guide an entire institution with effective leadership but cannot carry it on his (or her) back every day. This dedicated and energetic individual will become exhausted over time, and his family life will suffer.

Who will tell this well-respected, hard-working, engaging leader that he needs to slow down, create a sense of shared responsibility and ownership at the cabinet level, and strongly manage the expectations of campus stakeholders -- especially when hope is so bright, enthusiasm is growing, and donors are beginning to be generous again?

This president has fallen victim to seduction by great expectations.

Last, at a major institution, a brilliant academic has become the president and is beginning to experience some challenges because of his leadership style. He just doesn't know it yet.

Everyone acknowledges that this individual is very smart and talented. Unfortunately, he feels the need to constantly remind people just how brilliant he is. He sucks the air out of every room he is in, moving to the center of conversations seeking attention for himself. He acts as if he is the only person with any ideas, and he comes across as self-centered and arrogant. Brilliant though he may be, he hasn't yet come to understand the difference between "smartship" and leadership.

The impact of this president's leadership style is beginning to show itself. Followers, alumni, and donors are growing uninterested in what he has to say. People mumble and whisper about him in meetings. Others roll their eyes at each other to communicate, "Here he goes again." Attendance at regional alumni meetings is dwindling because his attitudes and behaviors have become widely known. Former donors seem to be unavailable for meetings. Faculty senate discussions are becoming contentious because members don't feel they are being heard by the president.

How does one tell this arrogant and brilliant individual that he needs to dramatically change his leadership style if he is going to be successful at leading the institution? Who delivers the message?

This president has brought about his own seduction by ego.

How to Avoid Seduction of the Leader

The following advice has been gleaned from working with more than a hundred presidents over the past 25 years. Most of these presidents were excellent leaders; a few were not. Their successes and their failures as presidents can serve as a guide in learning to navigate the complex minefield of leadership.

If you're not getting honest feedback, you're in trouble. The president must be proactive in encouraging a climate of honesty, openness, and candor. If your cabinet and other institutional leaders aren't pushing back on your ideas, sharing different perspectives, and asking the tough questions, you are ill-served and underinformed.

The cabinet, at the very least, should be the place for robust discussion and debate about institutional issues that matter. This goes beyond the collegial, “Does anyone have any questions?” about an idea or a proposal. The president must ask, “What about this proposal concerns you/makes you nervous/don’t you like or appreciate?” and wait patiently for some real answers.

I know one president who includes the ability to provide constructive feedback in cabinet meetings as part of the senior team’s performance appraisal. She gets great feedback and advice because she expects and rewards it.

Periodically a president should evaluate the effectiveness of the senior cabinet meetings. Aside from the obvious potential benefit of improved efficiency, this evaluation process produces two important intangible results: (1) It models transparency, and (2) It communicates that the president is open to the ideas of others, that people’s perspectives and advice are valued, and that feedback is a positive thing.

Everyone on the senior cabinet has opinions about the meetings -- everyone. It is essential to create a vehicle to bring those ideas into full view. An anonymous questionnaire that asks three simple questions can give you all the information you need to continue to improve the value of your cabinet meetings. These questions are:

- What is currently working well in our meetings?
- What needs to change to be even more effective?
- What advice or feedback do you have for me that would enhance my effectiveness in the meetings?

Capture the feedback and communicate it to the senior team as soon as possible. Then, actually use the information to improve your meetings in the future. I have seen members of several cabinets carry this vehicle out into their own functional units because they found it so valuable within the cabinet. As a result, effective meetings are taking place throughout their institutions -- an added bonus.

A note to the cynics out there: Many leaders subscribe to the myth that if someone has something to say in a meeting, he or she will say it. These “believers” tend to be overly verbal individuals who love to share their own wit and wisdom with everyone, all the time. They can’t imagine that others who are quiet, thoughtful leaders might have equally good ideas or equally strong opinions yet not speak up in a meeting or deal head-on with conflict.

Watch out for “comfortable cloning.” This dynamic occurs when leaders surround themselves with people who are very similar to them. This similarity could involve individuals of the same gender or race, but it could also include individuals who think in the same way (e.g., a linear thinker gravitating toward another linear thinker, or a creative type seeking out other creative people), who have common religious backgrounds, or who followed similar career paths (e.g., business school, development, or academic pathways).

Such similar individuals are “comfortable.” The learning curve for developing a working relationship will be short, and it is easy to hire or select these individuals to be part of a senior team. However, the president needs to resist the urge to follow the easy path and instead should actively seek out individuals who will provide the wide range of perspectives and backgrounds needed when discussing strategy, determining the institutional agenda, and debating important campus issues. Far more is learned from exploring a diversity of ideas than from sameness.

Surrounding oneself with comfortable people feels nice, and a cabinet full of like-minded individuals may be able to reach agreement rather quickly and move things forward. Unfortunately, those things may be moving in the wrong direction because of a failure to see other perspectives that were inaccessible or simply went unnoticed in a sea of sameness.

Use a 360-degree feedback process for yourself and your senior team. The 360-degree feedback process involves each leader soliciting anonymous feedback from multiple stakeholders about the leader’s strengths and areas of needed feedback. This takes real courage, but it can be one of the most compelling leadership experiences you will ever have.

There are dozens of excellent books and articles about the 360-degree feedback process and how to conduct it in the most constructive manner possible. It will communicate to institutional stakeholders that the president and cabinet

are open to the feedback of others and are on a learning journey as leaders. This is a powerful message to convey.

The information generated can help build a senior team in positive ways as individuals learn how others see them, seek the support and advice of other senior team members, and learn together how to lead the institution. Obviously, this takes some time and attention on the president's part, and it is important to understand the hard work that may lie ahead after leaders have received their feedback.

A word of caution: Never conduct a 360-degree feedback process on just yourself. Doing so might convey unintended messages to some stakeholders, leading them to assume you are in trouble. The procedure is best done as part of an ongoing learning process for a cabinet or senior team.

Find two confidants or mentors. Being the president can be both an exhilarating and a lonely job. You are in the public eye all the time; you are never not the president. Where can presidents go to express their doubts, dreams, and concerns? Many presidents have found that having the opportunity to discuss their ideas and feelings with a trusted adviser or colleague can be invaluable.

A confidant could be a former president or trustee, a leader from outside higher education, or a lifetime colleague. First and foremost, this person must be someone you respect and trust. Confidants have no personal agenda or expectation that they will benefit politically or monetarily from the relationship. Their primary purpose is to provide a thoughtful and deeply honest sounding board for the president -- and, at times, some emotional support.

The reason for having at least two confidants is to have a diversity of perspective and experience to rely on and to avoid the comfortable cloning syndrome.

Build in reflection time. An academic year can often be a blur of meetings, activities, social events, and on-the-road visits with alumni and trustees. It is important to discipline yourself and keep a journal about what you are learning as you move through this enduring whitewater.

Building time to reflect into each day or each week creates the opportunity for real learning and can help build the leadership muscles a president needs. What themes keep emerging, what are the stakeholders' aspirations, what excites people, what concerns them? What decisions need to be made to ensure the institution thrives? What questions keep coming up over and over again? Whom do you trust, and why? Who stimulates -- even provokes -- your thinking? Who provides you with effective feedback about your ideas?

A journal can be a source of both strategic and personal information few leaders capture and use effectively. Schedule a meeting with yourself daily, and take 30 minutes to record your thoughts. Review this informal information weekly, and discover the embedded messages it holds. Share this learning and discovery with your confidants and mentors, and even your senior team if you have built an open culture with them.

Meet with faculty. Presidents need to meaningfully interact with their faculty at least monthly. Host a breakfast or lunch meeting with five to seven faculty members to discuss institutional issues, faculty concerns, organizational culture, and the word on the street.

Be strategic and transparent when selecting the invited faculty and make sure different departments are represented, as well as tenured and non-tenured faculty. At times, invite informal faculty leaders who have great credibility with their peers. Adjuncts should also be invited periodically, because their perspective is different and often very helpful; such invitations also convey that adjuncts are important to the institution.

Frame the discussion around two themes: (1) What is working on campus, or what positive things are happening? and (2) What needs improvement and your attention as president? The meeting needs to be balanced, or it can quickly devolve into a complaint session.

These discussions will give you ongoing feedback about campus issues and faculty life. Be sure to include a curmudgeon or two in these conversations; they often are quite gifted at speaking truth to power and usually are not hard to find on a campus. Avoid the deep cynics. You can never win with a cynic, and they will take the discussion down a rat hole quickly.

Build your senior team. Only the president can build a high-functioning, coherent, and collaborative senior team. Unfortunately, few have the stomach for it. There are several reasons for this. Some don't have the relational skill set to build a climate of openness, honesty, and community. Others have never been on a real team and don't understand the need to invest the time to develop one; they miss out on the extraordinary leverage an effective team can bring to an institution. Still others believe the great myth that if you simply bring together really smart and talented people and "just let them do their jobs" somehow it will all work out.

Campuses are full of senior leadership groups that couldn't act as a real team if their lives depended on it. When a crisis hits, the flaws and conflicts surface and they fail to respond meaningfully. Don't wait until disaster strikes to build your team. At that point, it will be too late.

Never, ever be the smartest person in the room -- even if you are. No one is well served by a leader who thinks he (or she) knows everything. When a president acts like he already has all the answers, people will shut down in his presence, leaving him even less informed about campus realities than he was to begin with.

Some presidents are great at advocacy but quite poor at inquiry. Most leaders believe themselves to be excellent listeners, but I have rarely found this to be true. Ron Heifetz from Harvard tells us, "Most leaders die with their mouths open." Try to avoid this.

One of the most difficult things for a leader to learn is to be a great listener. You really have to care about what others have to say. I interviewed one rather famous president who told me that he tries to "appear to listen," which makes people feel better. I asked him if he thought people realize that he is being inauthentic; he replied, "No, I am a great actor."

The implications of this response are stunning and show not only how arrogant this individual is but also how far removed he is from reality. People know when someone is authentically listening. When followers feel truly listened to, they will share their insights, aspirations, and concerns -- and will provide the kind of information few presidents have access to.

If you have the courage, include the ability to listen in your 360-degree feedback process. It will give you a meaningful reality check about this important skill.

The Responsibility of Followership

The "seduction" of a leader is not an intentional or sinister act on the part of followers. Presidents are hard to push back on for multiple reasons. Nevertheless, cabinet members and other institutional leaders have an obligation to engage in honest exchange and communication with their president, especially with respect to important institutional issues. Disagreement is not disloyalty and, when done with respect, courtesy, and integrity, can enhance the final decisions a leadership group must make in order to serve the institution.

Presidents need to select people who will provide their honest reactions, perspectives, and ideas. They also need to visibly support those who tell it like it is. No president can have all the brilliant ideas; this simply is not possible given the complexity and challenges we face in our institutions of higher education. We need multiple perspectives, intelligent debate, and robust discussions if we are to achieve excellence.

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