

# The Successful President: Positioning Your Institution for Leadership

By Dr. Scott D. Miller and Dr. Marylouise Fennell - *College Planning & Management, August 2009*

Fred, Alice, Louis, Buddy, The Professor, and NoNo live in an Antarctic penguin colony facing a seemingly insurmountable challenge to survival. As described in *Our Iceberg is Melting: Changing and Succeeding under Any Conditions* by leadership guru John Kotter of the Harvard Business School, with Holger Rathgeber, their insular world is threatened when one of the birds makes the shocking discovery that the flock's habitat is inexorably slipping into the sea. Initially, no one believes him, until the urgency of his message becomes clear.

Now, although none of our readers is a penguin, we all know CEOs and other senior administrators who resemble these endearing characters in Kotter's recent fable of change, challenge, denial – until it's almost too late – and ultimately, of strategic adaptation and survival.

Although our "icebergs" may be in more temperate climates, our leaders face the same challenge of urgency as did Kotter's fabled emperor penguins. While we may indeed be "Kings" of our dominions, these realms are rapidly shrinking. Moreover, as Fred, Alice, et al., come to realize, the amount of required change will only intensify through time. Thus, deferring needed change now will dramatically lower the odds of success later.

Synergistic partnerships with other organizations are one way to expand the reach and visibility of your institution, attracting new donors, new students and volunteer leaders, and other enriching opportunities. However, we urge leaders to practice what we call the art of "rational impatience," that is, to seize the opportunity before the iceberg melts. Too often, we study new possibilities *ad infinitum* while our institutions continue to lose market share.

That's not to say, however, that we should grasp at any request for partnerships or community service. We need to be smart, savvy, and clear about exactly what our institutions and presidencies can gain from new opportunities. Here are some questions – "informed scrutiny" – that we recommend asking before forging new relationships.

- **How, precisely, will it enhance my university's credibility with key "elites" that matter to our stakeholders?** Does your institution need to cultivate the arts, businesses, or scientific/technical communities in your region? If you are a church-related institution, would it be beneficial to foster stronger ties with your sponsoring denomination? Targeted partnerships with credible organizations in your area of need can help take your institution to another level.
- **How, specifically, will it move my institution ahead?** Do you need to cultivate more regional opinion leaders? More major gifts prospects? Do you need to attract more qualified students and faculty? Do you need a presence in another market area? Carefully chosen, informed public/public and private/public relationships with organizations complementing your mission can help you to achieve your objectives while maximizing institutional resources.
- **If it involves a Board membership, will it introduce me to opinion leaders who can advance my institution?** We often hear new presidents say they feel overwhelmed by myriad requests for service on local and regional boards of directors; yet, our experience shows that when well chosen, such off-campus memberships almost invariably benefit the CEO's campus. In addition to opening doors into circles in which your college or university needs to be visible, such memberships often attracts qualified and talented new leadership for your own board of trustees.

Philanthropy and service are experiencing a new dawn – from the past as charity, to a future as a social investment. We are convinced that people avidly seek and are attracted to leaders and organizations with whom they can share win/win solutions to the pressing needs of our time. How can you best invest your time, talent, and treasure?

As you think about strategically positioning your presidency and your institution for regional leadership and beyond, consider ways in which your new alliances will add value, especially for alumni. How can you capitalize on potential partnerships to increase the worth of their diplomas? As a CEO, if you can do that in a measurable way, you can ensure a thriving future for your institution and a successful tenure as a leader.

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