

Building the Senior Team

Tips for building a team that can hit the ground running.

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TEAM-BUILDING IS ONE OF the most urgent, yet most challenging, of all priorities facing a CEO in the earliest days of his or her tenure. Choose too quickly, and you risk making damaging mistakes that may cripple your presidency from its outset. Move too slowly, and you lose the “honeymoon” phase in which new presidencies must flourish if they are to succeed.

While there are no guarantees when human variables are involved, our experience has shown that these time-tested strategies will produce senior-level teams that can hit the ground running while creating a climate of success for new presidencies.

Look for complementary strengths and skills. High-performing presidents are not threatened by individuals with greater skills in their areas of expertise than the presidents themselves; on the contrary, they seek them out. Effective leaders build on their own areas of strength while minimizing their weaknesses. An experienced search firm will help by adding diversity and balance to senior-level positions.

Bring naysayers into the fold. In her acclaimed 2005 bestseller *Team of Rivals*, Presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin describes President Abraham Lincoln’s inclusion of four outspoken former rivals for the Republican nomination into his cabinet, thus demonstrating his political genius. “That Lincoln made the unprecedented decision to incorporate eminent rivals into his political family, the Cabinet, was evidence of a profound self-confidence and a first indicator of what would prove to others an unexpected greatness,” she writes in her introduction. In so doing, Lincoln brought these naysayers and their former supporters into his inner circle, not only benefitting from their diverse strengths and talents, but also neutralizing opposition to his policies that could have doomed his fledgling administration. It’s an astute tactic that can benefit college and university presidencies as well.

Use a search consultant. An executive search firm will greatly broaden the playing field, identifying candidates who may not be

actively looking. Properly selected and used, consultants can actually save time, money, and costly hiring mistakes by thoroughly vetting candidates before the interview process begins.

Here are additional reasons why a professional executive search represents a prudent use of institutional resources when building a senior team:

- Executive search firms can shorten the interviewing process, thereby maintaining the interest of strong candidates.
- Executive search firms can perform “due diligence,” preventing costly mistakes in hiring and maximizing a strong fit with the organization.
- Executive search firms can both enhance the quality of the candidate pool and help the institution focus on a manageable list of finalists.

Surround yourself with people who will tell you the truth. In his 2011 *New York Times* bestseller *In the Garden of Beasts*, author Erik Larson describes the rise of Adolf Hitler in the first full year of the Third Reich, in which the rise of Nazism might still have been halted. Despite numerous warning signs and personal misgivings, senior diplomats and leaders of major world powers failed to challenge the German chancellor, in part because, ignoring Hitler’s actions to the contrary, they heard only what agreed with their own goals and values. Diplomats such as U.S. Ambassador William E. Dodd, who did tell the truth as he perceived it, were alternately ignored and rebuked.

The best presidents surround themselves with senior advisors who can be counted on to tell them what they need to hear, not necessarily what they *want* to hear.

No presidency succeeds alone; every CEO needs the synergy of a loyal, committed and talented senior team to fulfill the promise of a new presidency. Using these strategies will help to ensure that the new administration achieves its full potential. **TM**

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