

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR LEADERSHIP IN 2020

By Ginny Schaefer Horvath and Maya Ranchod Kirkhope

If you plan to apply for a senior level leadership position in the next few months or year, you are probably wondering how the upheaval of these past few months will influence your job search. Undoubtedly, the pandemic along with the racial unrest and turmoil in our country has had a serious effect on universities and colleges. The economic blow to already strained financial models in higher education has been substantial. Institutions face new enrollment crises, increased costs for social distancing, technology, and protective gear, decreased state and federal support, and loss of income from many sources. Racial tensions and systemic injustice have been exacerbated in this crisis, as health care disparities and acts of violence toward people of color leave many people frustrated and angry. As senior consultants at Academic Search, we have had extensive discussions about the challenges facing colleges and universities and about the ways skills typically sought in senior leaders are being re-evaluated in the pandemic and beyond. If you are a candidate or are preparing to enter the job market soon, you will also face a differing employment landscape. Fewer job opportunities, experiencing an entire search process virtually, and relocation challenges are among a few of the changes you are likely to encounter.

You may wonder, given all these changes, whether there have been modifications in the criteria used to evaluate candidates for senior level leadership roles? In other words, have the skills, qualities and qualifications typically sought in candidates for leadership positions, changed or altered since the pandemic? We believe that although many qualities of successful leaders remain immutable, a number of skills previously sought in executive level positions are now taking on new and heightened levels of importance. To help you navigate these uncharted territories and evolving landscapes, we have identified a list of top ten leadership skills we believe will become “essential skills” for 2020 and beyond.

1. FINANCIAL ACUITY.

Institutions have always sought candidates who are knowledgeable about managing complex institutional budgets. For public institutions, allocation and tuition formulas are particularly important, while for privates, pricing and discount rates are vital. Other areas of importance are investment of endowment funds, the financial implications of facilities, salaries, financial aid, market volatility, and technologies. Amid the current realities of the pandemic, however, financial acuity will now expand to include the ability to manage reductions in staffing, programs, allocate or redistribute budgets, and space.

Hiring authorities and search committees will seek to evaluate your strategies for forecasting multiple budget scenarios, managing budget reductions, prioritizing areas of continued investment, and communicating decisions with clarity and sensitivity. If you have been involved in budget reductions and reprioritizing processes that were managed poorly, don't be afraid to share the "lessons learned" with the search committee, along with strategies for managing differently and better, moving forward. And, if you do not have concrete experience in these specific areas, your ability to speak cogently on these subjects will be important.

2. CULTURAL COMPETENCY.

The capacity to engage effectively across cultural differences and to value diversity has long been an expectation for leaders at all institutions. Previously, search committees may have asked applicants to include statements on diversity, inadvertently signaling that attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion is an afterthought or philosophical stance. However, in the face of increased racial tensions and violence in the United States and globally, deeper awareness of systemic injustice, inequality, and privilege is expected to be demonstrated in more than public statements. Cultural competency must be more integrated into the world views of all members of campus communities, as they seek to understand

themselves and others, to practice inclusion, and to mediate inevitable cross-cultural misunderstandings and clashes. We encourage search committees not to request a "diversity" statement from candidates or pose a single diversity question during interviews, but instead to assess whether a candidate's commitment to all forms of diversity, equity, and inclusion is infused in their world view.

As you prepare to address your own cultural competency through the search process, recognize that search committees and hiring authorities will want to look beyond your statements and instead seek concrete evidence of your actions. Essentially, they will want you to demonstrate the tangible effects of your advocacy: your successes in developing and implementing inclusive policies, examples of programs addressing cultural awareness, support for marginalized groups, examples of building and supporting diverse teams, and very importantly, they will seek to ascertain your openness for continued growth.

3. TECHNOLOGICAL DEFTNESS.

Institutions have typically sought leaders who are comfortable, skillful, and sophisticated in using emerging technologies for instruction, institutional research, assessment, events, and business operations. Gone are the days when senior leaders relied on staff to manage their correspondence, report generation, and routine personnel management matters. However, the pandemic has heightened the importance of technological savviness and competence and now more than ever, you will be expected to be technologically astute and savvy. Leaders need to provide meaningful leadership regarding alternate delivery modes for programs and degrees.

As a candidate, you will now be expected to demonstrate your ability to use collaborative tools for videoconferencing, shared projects, and virtual meetings and model skillful and creative uses of technology. You should expect to speak about your ability to manage and motivate teams remotely, while adroitly managing

complex administrative and personnel matters as well.

4. CRISIS MANAGEMENT.

Senior leaders have been expected to be visible and effective at the helm when their institution or division faces a crisis. Now, however, in addition to preparing for natural disasters, fires, network system failures, active shooters, hate crimes, and injuries that require a coordinated response, institutional leaders also face the threats of public health emergencies and shutdowns related to COVID-19 and beyond, with sharply rising incidences of stress and mental health crises of students, faculty, and staff. As campuses reopen during the pandemic, the levels of anxiety from various constituent groups, parents, and local communities are substantial, and leaders need to remain calm, reassuring, and decisive.

As a candidate, your experience in developing and implementing emergency preparedness plans will count. Your ability to speak to your role in shaping your current institution's response to the pandemic and related challenges will be of particular importance to the search committee. And, if the experience was poorly managed, be prepared to speak to how you would manage differently and of course, the lessons learned.

5. ENTREPRENEURIAL MINDSET.

As the pandemic continues to create turmoil with enrollment, increasing financial and related stresses, institutions seek leaders who demonstrate an entrepreneurial mindset. Search committees will probe candidate experience in creating internal and external partnerships, forging beneficial relationships with business and industry, and developing revenue-generating initiatives. And, remember, while entrepreneurial mindsets are vital, implementing such initiatives tactically requires a respect for the mission and values of your institution— its history, its people, its strengths, and its local communities.

Essentially, you will be evaluated on your ability to be a calculated risk-taker, an innovative entrepreneur, and effective networker in the local community, while holding to institutional mission and vision. Many candidates make the mistake of stating that they are entrepreneurial and then responding poorly when probed. And, again, if you have not had much of a track record or opportunity to be entrepreneurial in your current or former positions, provide examples of what could be possible at the institution where you are interviewing.

6. POLITICAL SAVVINESS.

Knowing how to work strategically with elected officials at the local, state, and federal levels has long been an essential skill for college and university leaders. But with so much of the population now sharply divided along political lines, leaders must be especially adept at navigating through strong political winds. Institutions count on interest and support from elected officials on both sides of the aisle, as well as from the public. Leaders may feel pressured to take a strong stand on controversial issues, but even in their advocacy, they must model calm, informed civil discourse and encourage campus constituents to learn from multiple—often conflicting—perspectives.

Hiring authorities and search committees will evaluate you in part by asking for cogent examples of your successful work with a variety of local and state government officials and with Board members, donors, employees, and families who express strong political or controversial opinions. They may also ask for your experience managing student protests or dealing with a faculty member who takes a controversial stance.

7. EMPATHY AND RESPECT.

Leaders of colleges and universities are expected to care about the people associated with their institutions and communities. More than ever, as faculty and staff face anxiety about their

employment status and financial security, they look to leaders who are genuinely empathic and treat them with dignity and respect. Students need leaders who are aware of their challenges to attend college and are able to help them prepare for unpredictable career paths. Leaders now need to face the increasing harsh realities of student homelessness, hunger, and lack of affordable health care. Employees and students seek a sense of belonging and purpose as they attend and work at colleges and universities.

As they evaluate you, hiring authorities and search committees will want to delve into how you have shown respect for others, how you have demonstrated authentic concern and support for those around you, and how you have comported yourself, especially with regard to difficult decision-making; providing concrete examples during interviews will be helpful. Because input from your references and off-list references will play a significant part in the hiring authorities' assessment of you in this specific area, select references who can address this characteristic.

8. MULTI-GENRE COMMUNICATION SKILLS.

Of course, campus leaders must have strong written and verbal communication skills, but the ways that these skills are assessed are also changing. Leaders are now expected to be more than simply proficient in their writing and speaking. They must be persuasive verbal and visual storytellers, capable of delivering prepared and impromptu speeches—in person and virtually. Leaders must be efficient, timely, and clear in emails and memos, managing tone as well as content. They must have a clear sense of multiple, diverse audiences and a practical eye toward the frequency of communication. They must be good on camera and effective with reporters and media. They are expected to listen carefully, speak confidently, and facilitate productive problem-solving sessions. Leaders now need to know

appropriate uses of social media and to manage what they share on such sites.

Hiring authorities and search committees will evaluate you in part on your ability to communicate clearly and effectively in writing, in speaking live and on screen, in conversations and phone calls, and in emerging media. They will be attentive to how you conduct yourself during the search process as well, from your written materials, to your interview and public presentation skills. They will watch your video clips on social media and pay attention to your visibility on LinkedIn, Twitter, through Lexis Nexis reports, and other forms of social media. Google yourself and be cognizant of any negative information that appears. If you have been publicly criticized for making difficult decisions, be prepared to address the matter appropriately in your written materials and/or during your interviews.

9. HIGH EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE.

Although perhaps the most valued characteristic of leaders has been the ability to demonstrate confidence, people now seek those whose strength comes from knowing themselves and the people they serve. In addition to the quality of empathy, effective leaders are expected to demonstrate other components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, and social skills. Campus communities are increasingly wary of leaders who are egotistic, impulsive, and prone to bullying and micromanagement. Leaders inspire and work well with others when they are comfortable with themselves, self-reflective, keenly aware of their privilege and responsibilities, and able to regulate their emotions.

Hiring authorities and search committees will be particularly focused on assessing your emotional intelligence through their communications and interactions with you and through their conversations with your professional

references. They will be laser focused on the information gathered from your off-list references, particularly with regard to managing difficult administrative and personnel situations, and they will be attentive to how you comport yourself as you interact with a variety of people during the search process.

10. AGILITY.

Although leaders come into their positions with considerable experience and well-established professional knowledge and practice, their success now depends on their ability to be flexible in the face of many changes. Despite careful planning, leaders now need to be even more adaptable to rapidly changing conditions, such as the adjustments related to the pandemic. As institutions seek cost-cutting measures, there is an upswing in interim positions and consolidated portfolios, and leaders are directly affected by changes in the scope and scale of their responsibilities. Leaders are now being asked to assume more substantial responsibilities; in some instances, they are now asked to lead in areas where they have limited experience.

Increasingly, hiring authorities and search committees will evaluate you on your ability to pivot, learn quickly and independently, and adroitly move a team forward. Simply stating that you are agile won't suffice; they will seek evidence of your actions. They will probe whether you were able to adjust to unexpected changes, unanticipated staffing changes, substantial budgetary reductions, and unforeseen changes in your administrative portfolio.

Although many current job descriptions may not appear markedly different today from those in previous years, hiring authorities and search committees now place greater emphasis on many of the leadership skills described here, redefined in light of the current crises and events. Demands on institutional leaders will continue to grow, and more than ever, institutions need to select leaders who are capable and effective during turbulent times—demonstrating the fortitude, unflappable ability, and a moral compass to do the important work ahead. Hiring authorities and search committees need to use

a new lens for viewing the skills and experiences of potential senior leaders for our times.

As a candidate applying for a senior level leadership position, you must be prepared for the realities of the shifting landscape in higher education. Although we do not know what the new normal will look like, we urge you to prepare for the ways in which leadership expectations are changing.

Finally, we offer a few words of caution. If you have limited or no experience in any of the areas listed above, be prepared to talk about best practices in these areas. If you managed a situation poorly or were privy to a situation that was poorly orchestrated, focus on the lessons learned and how you would manage the situation better moving forward. Use best practice examples wherever possible and showcase, where appropriate, your knowledge of how institutions across the country are managing challenging situations in an effective and thoughtful manner. 

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