

Leadership Competency:

Navigating Change as a New Leader

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Tags

International Enrollment Management; International Student and Scholar Services; Leadership and Strategy; Partnerships; Personnel Management; University/Higher Education

Setting

Springfield University (SU) is a large, public institution, which has traditionally attracted a large number of international students. SU has recently seen a decline in international student enrollment numbers and they have been struggling to attract students from diverse regions of the world. The university leadership hopes to develop an international recruitment strategy to support their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The university is currently facing drastic budget cuts due to lower enrollment numbers and reduced state funding. Both the Director of International Enrollment Management and the Director of International Student and Scholar Services have recently retired. As a result, the university merged the two positions into a Director of International Student Outreach and Services. This case highlights the experience of the newly hired director and her approach to leadership in this new role.

Case

During a 6-month search, the hiring committee identifies Eva as a good fit for the new Director of International Student Outreach and Services position. She has previously worked at a small, private institution as their Assistant Director of International Student Services. Eva interviews very well and is able to showcase her strategic mindset. The committee makes an offer and Eva eagerly accepts the position, which will provide her with the opportunity to learn to navigate the nuances and complexities of the system and relationships at a large, public university. These relationships include collaboration with units such as the Career Center, Admissions,

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the Advising Centers, etc. and understanding the university culture, the inner workings of each unit, and how each one plays a role in the larger university setting.

During the first few weeks, Eva is introduced to many people on campus. She tries to learn the unique roles of each individual and each unit on campus, their policies and procedures, and how they relate to the international student experience and success. She observes that the operations of this large, siloed campus are very different from the way things were handled at her previous institution. For example, the recruitment staff and the staff in International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) each send separate communications to admitted international students, often creating confusion for those students. As another example, Eva learns that the larger student services units on campus (e.g. Student Organizations) run programs for international students, without letting ISS staff know and vice-versa. As a result, Eva will need to tap into her leadership toolkit to come up with some solutions.

Through her conversations, Eva is able to formulate many ideas to streamline processes, including drafting new policies to be more student-centered with a holistic and strategic approach to international student recruitment and retention. While she strives to strengthen relationships with campus partners and provide opportunities for more collaboration, she is struck by the many inefficiencies. It seems that each process is layered with many steps and the students are often given the runaround. However, Eva is confident that she can bring about positive change, as she has often been regarded as a change agent and a bridge builder.

Three months into the job at SU, Eva decides to take charge and start cleaning up processes. She opts to communicate her vision and proposed changes via email to both her recruitment and ISSS teams. In the email, she provides them with “top-down” instructions on collaborating to streamline messaging for prospective and new international students. In addition, her message includes a list of “solutions” to many of the other status quo process inefficiencies. She feels that this approach allows her to move quickly on making some critical changes with a strategic mindset, while displaying her “take charge” leadership skills. In the email, she mentions her intent to send a similar message to campus partners (e.g. Admissions, Student Services, student success centers, etc.) to provide proposed steps to partner in improving the experience for international students.

The email’s distribution prompts immediate discussion among staff members. A few of the staff reply to Eva and share their disappointment in Eva’s approach and ask to meet with her. They express their concern with Eva’s intention to message campus colleagues and feel that it will backfire. They state that the campus culture is one that embraces open dialogue and values an inclusive approach. These types of changes normally take time to identify and to implement. Moreover, each individual and campus unit has a different perspective, which needs to be incorporated into any change or new process.

Eva believes in moving things along quickly and is feeling deflated. However, when she meets with some of the disgruntled employees and listens actively as they share their dismay, she starts to understand. They do not perceive Eva’s top-down approach as a way to move things along more quickly. From their perspective, this approach is neither inclusive nor collaborative. Furthermore, they question Eva’s knowledge of the university system and functionalities in such a short period of time and suggest that it limits her ability to be able “to drive” next steps. They doubt her ability to continue to serve SU and its international students and her teams well, given this initial mismanagement of messaging.

Eva is able to control her emotions, step back, and take in the feedback. Upon further reflection, Eva acknowledges the many complexities of this new institution, which includes many units with a siloed approach but all with the same goal of student success. She realizes that she acted too quickly. She sends a follow-up message to her teams apologizing about the top-down approach and proposes to meet with each of them to understand the “what, why, when, and how?” behind each process and policy before making any further decisions. She promises to take time to understand the internal campus culture more, facilitate more robust discussions, and come to a collective decision about any change.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Was it appropriate for Eva to email instructions on how to improve processes and policies, after having been in her position for three months? Why or why not?
- In this case, how does word choice and modality of messaging play a role? How should a leader decide when to communicate in person versus in writing?
- Eva thought she was acting as a true leader in this approach. However, her message backfired. How do you define a true leader?
- How can a leader foster consultation and collaborative decision making with intentionality?
- How should a leader approach balancing quick and impactful change with collective decision making?
- What are the essential skills required for effective leadership in international education, whether you are a new or seasoned leader?
- Retell the story. Imagine that you are Eva and change one critical decision in the case study. How would that impact the outcomes?