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You Were Just Named Interim. Now What?

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Being named the interim leader in your unit or department can be both exciting and scary. Unfortunately, there are not many road maps out there to guide you. Here is some guidance from others who've been there.

By Ashlyn W. Sowell, Associate Vice President for Campaign Operations and Engagement, Johns Hopkins University

In this time of a global pandemic, high unemployment, and financial pressures, it is likely that more people in advancement will be named to interim roles and likely for longer time periods. Perhaps some guidance would be useful from a few of us who have been there:

- **Ashlyn W. Sowell** - I had the honor of serving as interim vice president for development and alumni relations at Gettysburg College about ten years ago. I have had time to reflect on that growth experience, and I can share some of the opportunities and challenges that I faced.
- **Rachel Hitchcock** - More recently, my colleague at Johns Hopkins University, Rachel Hitchcock, served as the interim associate dean of our School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and I'll share some of her tips, as well.

- **Aristide J. Collins** - Also, I was lucky enough to talk with Aristide J. Collins, Jr., vice president, chief of staff to the president, and secretary of George Washington University, who gave some great advice.

Here is what we have to share.

Accepting and Adapting to the Role

You might have a range of emotions when asked to take on a new interim role – surprised, flattered, and maybe a bit nervous. The first piece of advice Rachel gave was to say yes! A leader in your institution has asked you to step up, and they probably vetted your name well in advance. This could be a great opportunity for you to learn, lead, and grow. Aristide agreed, saying, “Never turn down an assignment.” Think about the portfolio of work and where this might lead you in your career in the future.

Now, in most cases when you take on an interim role, you also get to keep your current role. (Lucky you!) Therefore, prioritizing and delegating are essential skills. You will need to quickly identify trusted allies, both internal and external. In some cases you may overlap with the person leaving, but in other cases you may be on your own to figure out the job. In that event, where can you turn for advice and information? Rachel mentioned the advisory board members and high level volunteers who helped her get up to speed. Aristide had the advantage of having worked in the development office at George Washington previously; when he was pulled back in to be the interim VP, he was able to reconnect with key staff who had experience and history at the institution and who supported him well. Establishing relationships with the lead donors was another top priority.

Asking for Help

In some cases, you will have entirely new responsibilities. At Gettysburg, I was suddenly in charge of the budget and found myself working with the board of trustees. Rachel picked up a 75th anniversary event that was only a few short months away. Aristide was given the charge to continue fundraising for a historic campaign (and to finish it early and above goal if possible). This requires quick learning on the job and also the *willingness to ask for help* when you need it. Aristide emphasizes the importance of asking for advice; one benefit of being in an interim role is that people understand that you have jumped in to help. They know that you are doing the best you can; they will want to support your success in achieving your goals.

Are the expectations clear? Rachel gave credit to her manager, who suggested a one page written agreement with all parties that laid out the expectations and the time frame. The manager to which she was now reporting in her new role also identified clear expectations about what success looked like in this role and included that in the agreement, as well. The document served as an excellent guidepost, and it also helped the staff in her regular, full-time role in principal gifts know how long she would be assisting SAIS and how they could best support her.

Communication

Communication is critical. For some of my colleagues, I went from being their peer to their supervisor overnight. I had to think about broad communication to the whole department, as well as individual meetings with those most directly impacted. And remember, depending on the circumstances, some of your staff might be feeling a bit uncertain and fearful about the future. Aristide started by inviting a few new people to his leadership team, including HR and finance reps. He also did a lot of management by walking around, engaging people, and listening to their concerns and ideas. He even launched a survey on staff morale and culture.

Other Key Considerations

These next items may seem small in the scope of things, but are pretty important.

Who will provide you with administrative support? Where will you actually work? Your calendar is getting ready to blow up, I promise you. In some cases, you can bring along your current assistant, but in others you might need to use the staff member who is already in place. Either way, spend some time with that person, look at the priorities, and get in sync on your working style. You will rely on this person to be a good gatekeeper and to help you through some long days. Rachel was able to use a hybrid model in which a few people kept things running smoothly. When we spoke, she emphasized being direct. That was especially important as she was navigating between two offices in Baltimore and Washington, D.C.; sometimes, she was communicating from the train. In today's remote work environment, this might be a bit easier, but you will still have to balance your days and workload carefully in order to keep up your own energy and proceed with clear thinking.

Compensation

Compensation is an area to consider as well. In this sample size of three, we were all compensated for our additional work. However, in today's financial climate, you might be asked to take on more responsibility *without* pay. If that is the case, what else can you negotiate for? Extra time off after the assignment is over, bonus pay at the end, or additional training and development out of the office might be good rewards to seek. Aristide hopes that leaders will see the work as vital and make that offer, but even if they don't, he still advises you take on the interim role and see how you can challenge yourself and take some risks.

Closing Thoughts

Looking back ten years ago, I can see some of the hardest days of my career, but also ones that I am grateful for and which led me to other opportunities at Gettysburg and Hopkins. I think in the most trying of times, you are learning and growing at a rapid pace, and much of it is self-guided. Rachel reports that she would not have been in a position to take on her current role (associate dean of the

Krieger School of Arts and Sciences at Johns Hopkins) without the visibility that she received at SAIS and the confidence that she gained in that interim role. Similarly, Aristide was able to continue in the VP role and then was recognized for his talent by a new president, who invited him to take on the role of chief of staff. Aristide also values the relationships that he has built and even friendships he has made.

One final bit of advice, especially in this uncertain time – respect people and treat them well. We work with so many others, and people sit in the chairs before us and after us. Never criticize your predecessor and try to leave things better than you found them. Best of luck!

P.S. Are you interested in the job? Take some time to actually do the job and then decide. If you choose to move ahead, list the pros and cons and think through the impact of each one. You are in a unique position to talk with the decision makers about the candidate pool and how you might stack up. If you decide not to move ahead, how can you influence the search process for the new hire and be most helpful in onboarding that person? At the end of the day, you have been given a great career opportunity, so be sure to capitalize on it while you can!

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