

“Sitting Beside:” Assessing leaders in this era of uncertainty, A Guide

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This Guide is based on the article *“Sitting Beside”: Assessing leaders in an era of uncertainty*, published in *Inside Higher Education*, 2021. This Guide has two major changes. First, we have greatly expanded the Section, Conducting a *Sitting Beside* session. Second, we have defined leaders who hold leadership positions in higher education but also leadership positions in a variety of nonprofit organizations. Thus we have used the word “leader” to include positions such as President, CEO, Chancellor, Head, Dean, Executive Director, Chief Executive, Director, Superintendent, Senior Pastor, etc. A leader can include any person with the responsibility to lead an administrative unit in a higher education institution or a nonprofit organization. The unit can refer to a department, college, program, Center, Institute, or the entire institution or organization.

On this website, two separate Guides provide a number of suggestions on conducting an assessment of a leader who has the most senior level position (e.g., President or Chief Executive) and reports to a Governing Board (e.g., Board of Trustees). They are: *Sitting Beside: Developmental Assessment of Presidents of Academic Institutions: A Guide*, and *Sitting Beside: Developmental Assessment of Executive Directors of Academic Institutions: A Guide*.

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Introduction

The pandemic, racial inequity and economic crises are posing unprecedented challenges for leadership in higher education institutions and nonprofit organizations. Administrators at all levels – presidents, vice presidents, directors, provosts, deans and department chairs in higher education and Executive Directors, Directors, administrator of administrative units in nonprofit organizations – face an era of chronic uncertainty that will last for months and even years. Their work environment has been dramatically altered, requiring decision making that is faster and yet more collaborative. With existential threats more likely, responsiveness to changing environmental pressures is more important than ever. A leader at all administrative levels is forced to guide their unit to be flexible and adaptive, and responsive to unanticipated environmental barriers and opportunities. These abnormal times call for a different and more productive approach to leadership assessment, one that can be called “sitting beside” (a term that we admit is a bit ironic in these days of physical distancing).

Consider the derivation of the word assess: *assidere*, the Latin word meaning to “sit beside.” *Sitting Beside* brings to mind such verbs as engage, involve, interact, share, trust. It conjures up images of working together, discussing, reflecting, helping, building, and collaborating. It implies dialogue and discourse, understanding the other’s perspective before giving value judgments. We have used this principle for the past four decades in assessing persons in higher education, initially for faculty, to intentionally promote the integration of assessment and development (e.g., Braskamp and Ory, 1994; Braskamp and Schomberg, 2007; Braskamp and Wergin, 2008). In this paper, we argue that a *Sitting Beside* approach to leadership assessment can be more appropriate for this era than a traditional, top-down, “standing over” perspective.

The why, what, and how of assessment. One primary purpose of assessing leaders remains the same – we assess leaders so that they and their institutional and organizational units will become more effective. The desired gains are complementary. (The other major purpose is to determine future status including compensation.) However, we need to rethink the *what* and *how* of assessing leaders: what criteria and expectations, and which assessment processes, are most useful in this era of uncertainty. *Sitting Beside* assessment of leaders is intended to meet both requirements. It has three major characteristics: *developmental in purpose, collaborative in form, and futuristic in focus.*

***Sitting Beside* highlights developing leaders.** All leaders, as human beings, change, grow and develop holistically – socially, intellectually, physically, spiritually, politically, etc. Given the demands of any leader today, the lines between personal and professional growth are often blurred. We suggest three broad categories to consider in a *Sitting Beside* assessment, which are those often included in any “traditional” assessment of leaders. But in *Sitting Beside* we propose that a leader select criteria, issues and topics that encourage reflection, learning, joint problem solving and action (continuous adaptation).

The three categories are:

- Leadership qualities and personal well-being
- Leadership skills and competencies
- Well-being of the institutional or organizational unit

The first category refers to the qualities of the leader. It focuses on who a leader is and includes such terms as characteristics, attributes, traits, qualities, values, dispositions, strengths, attitudes, and virtues.

Leaders are often judged in terms of being adaptive, agile, decisive, disciplined, emotionally mature, enterprising, flexible, humble, innovative, kind, persuasive, proactive, self-confident, socially mature, supportive, or trustworthy. We recommend also consider resilience, empathy, caring, and trust others have in a leader when a leader needs to lead in uncharted territory, and if appropriate the personal well-being of the leader.

The second category is the leader's leadership skills and competencies, i.e., what a leader does. They include financial management, relations with colleagues, staff and faculty (if appropriate), culture building, communication, and strategic planning. We suggest that a leader also consider the emotional welfare of colleagues, staff, and students and recipients. How effectively is the leader in addressing the heightened disorientation of colleagues and staff? How is a leader engaged in self-reflection, having authentic dialogue with colleagues and stakeholders and taking reasonable risks and learning from mistakes?

The third category is a leader's role in advancing the progress of their unit (e.g., a department, college or the total institution or organization). It focuses on the present status and projected future of the unit--the well-being of the unit. Has the leader advanced the unit that aligns with the predetermined goals, which also may be changing during this era of uncertainty? Is the current progress of their unit reasonable and consistent with those of the expectations of the total institution, as measured by traditional indicators such as quality, financial well-being, fund raising, and achievements of students, and services to participants? In *Sitting Beside* assessment we also recommend that a leader focus on their contribution to progress in terms that also extend beyond the traditional indicators of success. How is the leader directing the unit that reflects the unit's well-being broadly defined – the morale of staff, successes and struggles in meeting the goals of the unit, disasters avoided? “What is and is not working?” and “What should the leader change and keep right now and the immediate future?”

***Sitting Beside* fosters and promotes collaboration.** In this era, an institution or organization will succeed by being responsive to the immediate and long term environmental realities and to both internal and external expectations of the major constituencies and stakeholders (e.g., colleagues, boards, students, participants, parents, employers, service providers, recipients, alumni and donors, community members, public officials).

Leaders will benefit by establishing honest working partnerships with each other, where stress and mental health issues have become more salient in their professional and personal life. Given the current level of uncertainty about the future, leaders are expected to be resilient and adaptive, creating an organizational culture that encourages and supports others to adopt this same mindset and behavior. This is a time for a spirit of collective thinking, fresh appraisal of old assumptions, and an honest admission that no one person has all the answers moving forward.

***Sitting Beside* is futuristic in its focus.** A leader is the leader at a specific institution or organization. Thus the mission, identity, culture, wealth, aspirations, goals, successes, setbacks, and opportunities for the future must still be an integral part of an assessment of any leader. Leaders will be expected to be engaged in longer term planning and redesigning their unit. They are to guide their unit in the next few years to remain sustainable and competitive. They are expected to direct their unit to adapt to a changing and uncertain future. In doing so, leaders and their colleagues need to continuously tackle these questions: “What is essential now and in the future?” and “Who are we and what do we wish to become?”

The future contributions of higher education and nonprofit organizations to our society are dependent on our recognition that we are not going back to normal. We need to accept loss. While most leaders desire change, they often resist the loss (and have grief) inherent in change (Bolsinger, 2018). In moving forward leaders can expect sabotage from their colleagues. “Sabotage is natural... Saboteurs are usually doing nothing but unconsciously supporting the status quo... They are preserving something dear to them.” (p. 174). *Sitting Beside* can help all partners in accepting and dealing with this strong human condition. However, loss is not ignoring the fundamental core mission of the institution or organization, and its identity, and values. They are not automatically to be cast aside in favor of new ones. Stability is as important as agility; both are necessary moving forward.

While *Sitting Beside* assessment centers on the development of a leader, its ultimate goal is to enhance the well-being of an administrative unit by helping the leader to develop and grow as a leader. During the tenure of any leader, the reviewer (for a President or Chief Executive, the reviewer will be a Board of Trustees) may have to ultimately decide that a change in leadership is required. *Sitting Beside* still remains a humane strategy to communicate unwelcome news, reconcile differences, and help the leader to accept the finality of the institution’s decision. (Terrence MacTaggart, 2020 and 2021, provides many useful strategies that fulfill a number of purposes for assessing presidents reporting to a Governing Board.)

Conducting *Sitting Beside* Sessions

Sitting Beside assessment is an interpersonal joint endeavor between two partners: a leader and a reviewer who is the partner conducting the assessment or review of a leader. The reviewer may have a supervisory responsibility of a leader or be empowered (e.g., Board of Trustees) to review a leader. Keep in mind that the primary purpose of a *Sitting Beside* session is to create time and space for learning from each other, for reflection and joint problem solving and for considering concrete next steps and immediate adaptations. If a discussion or review of the future status of the leader is included (e.g., compensation) the tone of the session will change. If such issues are to be included they should be discussed and determined before a session begins.

A *Sitting Beside* session has many benefits. The leader has an opportunity to express and share what is most essential and important to them as a leader; receive constructive criticism from the reviewer; reflect that leads to action; consider risks to take; and receive affirmation and support from the reviewer. The leader can learn more about the views and goals of the reviewer about their successes and challenges. The reviewer can gain a better understanding and awareness of the challenges facing the leader; promote a collaborate mindset; engage in joint problem solving; and provide support and challenge to the leader. The reviewer can become a better mentor in this assessment process.

A *Sitting Beside* assessment is built on three principles of practice: Mutual trust, Duality of challenge and support, and Context.

***Sitting Beside* is built on mutual trust.** In *Sitting Beside*, all partners need to be committed to being honest and receptive to feedback with a sense of both urgency and humility. Both partners will be asked to assess accurately what is as well as what can be. Informed judgments are evidence based, of course, but a *Sitting Beside* session goes beyond a presentation of evidence. It is a personal interactive exchange of perspectives, ideas, concerns, judgments, problem solving, and brainstorming. It fosters reflection, learning, and continuous adaptation. It promotes a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006).

***Sitting Beside* includes both challenge and support.** A leader will become more effective if they are both challenged and supported. The practice of integrating challenge and support has been a major working principle for over a half century in higher education. Both are both needed to foster growth and improvement. Finding the balance of challenge and support is of course an individual matter. Too much or too little of either inhibits learning and development: an imbalance of support can lead to complacency; and imbalance of challenge can lead to paralyzing anxiety (Csikzentmihalyi, 1997).

It's finding that space of constructive disorientation, a term that Jon Wergin (2020) in his book, *Deep Learning*, uses to explain the genesis of deep learning, a disposition to challenge and reflect upon one's assumptions, best acquired through social relationships. Where *Sitting Beside* can be most valuable is that by sitting together, a leader and their partner can work to find that safe space, together, which would be difficult or impossible with a "standing over" relationship.

***Sitting Beside* recognizes relationships and experiences of partners, environmental context, and institutional and organizational context.** A *Sitting Beside* session requires taking into consideration the current relationship between a leader and the reviewer. Partners who have a long established positive working relationship will have substantive sessions more quickly than those where relationships are new or may be strained. The leadership experience of the leader will also influence the topics to be addressed and the type of feedback needed. A leader who has been in their position for a long period may have a different perspective on assessment and feedback than a leader who has recently assumed their role.

National and worldwide forces such as the pandemic, economic distress and racial inequity also may influence the work of leaders. A leader may face physical and mental health challenges they would never have anticipated prior to COVID 19 (both personally and organizationally). (Since Larry was quarantined for a month with COVID-19, he can attest to the emotional challenges of such an experience. See *Inside Higher Education*, www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/08/03/former-college-president-describes-getting-coronavirus-and-offers-advice-helping-for-his-personal-perspective.)

Finally, the context of the institution or organization -- its history, mission, wealth, goals, and culture -- is critical in designing and implementing a *Sitting Beside* session. Current financial challenges, personnel issues, or recent internal events can affect the tone and topics selected. When to explore a topic is an important consideration for a *Sitting Beside* session is to be useful to both partners.

We offer some suggestions for planning and conducting a *Sitting Beside* session:

1. The partners jointly schedule a session, perhaps one or two annually, depending on circumstances and context. (If the leader reports to a Board of Directors or Trustees, more than one person reviewing the leader may be preferred. While the Chair of a Board and the leader are key partners, an assessment will often be more useful when perspectives from more than one Board member are included.)
2. The leader being reviewed can prepare an Agenda, by selecting 3-4 topics to be discussed in a session. The leader should select topics that are both important to them and to the reviewer. The reviewer can also select topics for consideration before or during a session. Appendix A provides a sample of topics that could be included or revised for a session.
3. The leader may provide in advance some written comments about the selected topics or issues, but they should be brief. One to two pages is recommended to be provided to the reviewer.
4. A *Sitting Beside* face to face session is preferred, but during the pandemic era a remote conversation may be required. The session should allow sufficient time for reflection, discussion, joint problem solving, and consideration of possible future actions to be taken. At least 60 minutes is suggested.
5. The leader can provide a confidential short written summary of the issues, action items and next steps discussed and decided in a session. Both can provide a summary if both consider it useful.
6. The leader monitors progress on actions proposed in a session and reports back to the reviewer at an appropriate time. The reviewer can provide further feedback that can enhance the development of the leader.

Summary

In this pandemic era, leaders are now tossed into an era of uncertainty and disorientation, with unprecedented and often existential threats. The primary purpose of *Sitting Beside* assessment is to foster leadership development, given the human challenges leaders now face. It creates a space for listening, focused conversations of engagement, and joint problem solving. Good assessment requires one to judge but to not be judgmental in doing so. It incorporates emerging criteria of leadership excellence and effectiveness, and highlights the importance of integrating reflection, learning, joint problem solving, and action (continuous adaptation). *Sitting Beside* assessment provides a useful mindset and strategy for the challenges of fostering the development of leaders in this era of heightened uncertainty.

Appendix A

In a *Sitting Beside* session, we propose that leaders and reviewers select issues and topics that encourage reflection, learning, joint problem solving and action (continuous adaptation). Leaders will optimally benefit if they select topics related to their leadership qualities or skills and competencies that they would like to improve. Leaders may also focus on the well-being of their unit and how their leadership can move the unit forward. The topics often are interconnected, relating to all three dimensions of leadership: qualities, skills and competencies, and the well-being of the unit.

We offer some examples of topics that can be included or adjusted for a *Sitting Beside* session. They are written in question form for the leader to select and answer.

Qualities and Personal Well-being

- How has the pandemic impacted how you lead and where you are focusing your attention?
- Are internal tensions rising due to events in the external environment? If so, how are you addressing them?
- How are you and your colleagues handling loss—personnel, resources?
- How is your personal well-being (emotional, physical, mental health) during this era?
- How do you communicate hope for the future?

Skills and Competencies

- How are you promoting a culture that incorporates both adaptability and stability?
- How are you able to prioritize your energy and influence in areas that will yield the greatest impact on the future well-being of your unit?
- What leadership actions (e.g., communicating vision and goals, building culture, adapting for the future, instilling fiscal responsibility) do you rely on more heavily now?
- How are you getting feedback on what you should know and do as a leader?
- How are you communicating your views of being responsive, adaptive, and flexible throughout your unit?

Institutional or Organizational Well-being

- What is working and not working for you as the leader of your unit?
- What barriers and opportunities have you recently encountered? How are you addressing them?
- How successful are you in finding new revenue sources and reducing expenses?
- What are the next big issues facing you in leading your unit?

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