

Leadership Team Handbook: A Practical Guide for University Presidents

Why This Handbook Matters

As a university president, you know that a high functioning leadership team aligned and working together with you is essential to institutional success. But building that alignment, especially with new Cabinet members—requires clear expectations, shared values, and an intentional leadership culture. Bringing a leadership team together takes more than just hiring talented individuals requires a shared vision, clear expectations, and a commitment to working as a cohesive unit.

That's why I created this Leadership Team Handbook—to help new Cabinet members quickly adapt to the university's culture, ensuring alignment, efficiency, and mutual accountability. It outlines key principles, expectations, and cultural norms that help leaders adapt to the unique demands of university administration.

This is a comprehensive yet practical guide to onboarding new Cabinet members and ensuring they understand how to work effectively within the president's leadership vision. Full disclosure - I wrote this based on my experience as an academic leader (I wished I had this when I was a member of an executive team!) and university president and it was **not** generated by asking AI to write it.

Best of all, this handbook can serve as a template for you to customize it to reflect your own leadership style, priorities, and the specific needs of your institution. Every university is different, and this guide provides a structured framework that you can tailor to fit your team's culture, challenges, and strategic goals.

What This Handbook Covers:

- **The President's Leadership Philosophy** – Every president leads differently. This section helps set the tone for your executive team, providing insight into how you think, make decisions, and approach problem-solving. It allows you to define what you expect from your leadership team and how they can best work with you.
- **Understanding the President's Role & How to Support It** – Cabinet members often focus on their own units, but successful leadership requires a university-wide perspective. This guide helps your team understand the broader responsibilities of the presidency and how they can actively contribute to institutional success.

- **Cabinet & Leadership Team Values** – Culture isn’t built by accident. This section establishes the core values you want to define your leadership team and reinforces how those values translate into daily decision-making and interactions.
- **How We Communicate & Make Decisions** – One of the biggest challenges in university leadership is avoiding information silos and ensuring open, transparent communication. This handbook provides clear guidance on decision-making processes, meeting expectations, and best practices for Cabinet engagement.
- **The Importance of Engagement & Visibility** – University leadership is about more than decision-making—it’s about building relationships and credibility. This section reinforces why presidents, and their executive teams must be present and engaged—whether it’s with faculty, staff, students, alumni, donors, or external stakeholders. It also outlines how a president’s presence at key events can strategically advance institutional goals.
- **Reframing Leadership: The Four Perspectives That Shape Presidential Decision-Making** – Based on Bolman and Deal’s leadership framework, shows who I will think holistically about how I approach my work by considering:
 - Structural factors (roles, policies, and organizational systems)
 - Political dynamics (coalitions, influence, and power structures)
 - Symbolic leadership (vision, storytelling, and institutional traditions)
 - Human resource considerations (people, motivation, and team culture)
- **Collective Responsibility: Succeeding as a Team** – Leadership isn’t about individual success—it’s about building a unified team that works together toward shared goals.
- **Expectations for Cabinet Meetings & Strategic Discussions** – Cabinet meetings are not just routine check-ins—they are a space for solving problems, aligning strategies, and making informed decisions. This handbook provides a structured approach to ensuring meetings are productive, focused, and action oriented.

Make It Your Own

This handbook is designed to be a flexible template that you can personalize to reflect your leadership style and the unique needs of your institution. You can modify it to fit your:

- leadership philosophy to reflect your personal approach
- core values and cultural expectations to align with your university’s priorities
- communication and decision-making processes based on how you want your Cabinet to function

If you’re looking for a tool to enhance your leadership team’s effectiveness, the full document is available for free. Just send me an email request at thinkshift@gmail.com, and I’ll be happy to share the full version with you!