

Presidential Leadership: Managing Egonomics

BY DEVORAH LIEBERMAN, PHD



PRESIDENTS CORNER

Presidents and chancellors are trained to think deeply about institutional economics: budgets, enrollment trends, tuition discounting, philanthropy, and long-term sustainability. As a former president, I remember analyzing data, building pro formas, forecasting outcomes, strategic planning, and debating return on investment. Nearly every decision, large or small, was accompanied by multiple meetings, ongoing conversations, well-reasoned arguments, and what I believed were thoughtful decisions.

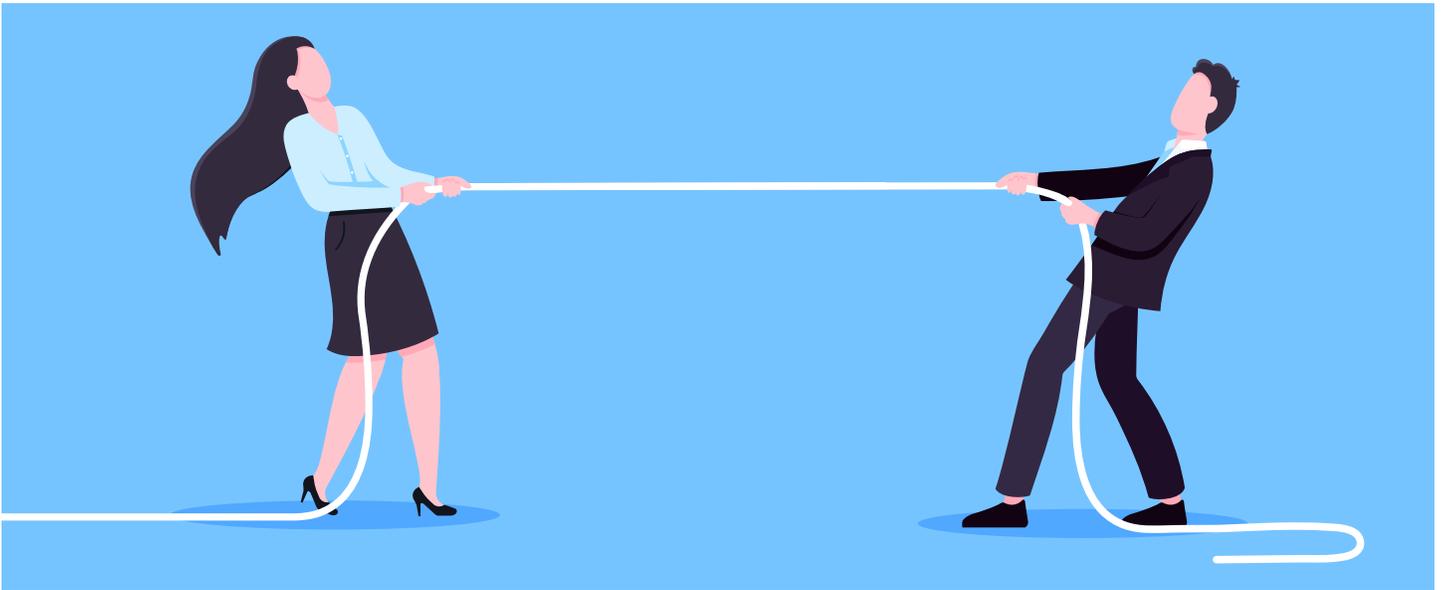
Yet, another force influences and shapes presidential decision-making, one that operates largely in the shadows and is rarely named: Egonomics.

I created the term Egonomics to describe the presence of multiple competing egos in the decision-making process. On the surface, this is not about others' vanity or personal grandstanding. It is about identity, expertise, authority, legacy, and the deeply human need to feel respected and valued, especially in environments populated by highly educated, articulate professionals.

Everyone across the institution has a stake in the outcome: trustees, senior leaders, deans, chairs, faculty, staff, and students. However, the president, the ultimate decision maker, must keep the following uppermost in mind,

- 1 What is the best decision to serve the mission and sustainability of the institution?
- 2 How can I move the conversation to focus on what is best for the institution?
- 3 How can this conversation move to the understanding that the outcome is greater than the sum of its parts?

In higher education, ego can often be disguised as thoughtful, logical debate.



When Academic Debate Is Not Really About the Idea or Subject at Hand

Our industry respects argument and critique. Faculty members, administrators, and board leaders are trained to challenge assumptions and test logic. Debate is part of our DNA. But experienced presidents learn, sometimes painfully, that not every disagreement or debate is truly about the merits of a proposal, though it is often presented as such.

Often, the disagreement is about something else. For example:

- A dean who feels their authority has been bypassed
- A faculty leader who believes their discipline is being marginalized
- A vice president who worries that years of their efforts are being undone
- A long-serving administrator who feels invisible during rapid change
- A trustee who feels their professional expertise is not being valued

When these dynamics are misread as purely intellectual disagreement, leaders can find themselves stuck in circular conversations (rabbit holes) and endless meetings. Arguments sharpen, data improves and yet nothing seems to move. The loudest or most confident voice often prevails, not because it is right, but because the speaker's ego dominates the room.

The insightful president pauses to ask: Whose ego is implicated here and why?

The Quiet Skill of “Ego Literacy”

Effective presidents develop what might be called “ego literacy”: the ability to recognize emotional and positional subtext beneath the professional discourse. This does not mean the president should avoid conflict or yield to pressure. It means understanding that people defend ideas most fiercely when those ideas are inseparable from their own professional identity or sense of standing.

Resistance often stems from a simple fear: someone is winning, and I am losing.

When presidents, reading the room, account for this reality, their facilitation and decision-making become not only more efficient but also more sustainable.



Managing Economics in Practice

Economics surfaces most clearly in cabinet meetings, faculty councils, department discussions, and faculty senate debates. Presidents who manage it well tend to do a few things consistently:

- They honor expertise. Framing decisions in ways that acknowledge professional contributions lowers defensiveness and signals respect.
- They give credit before asking for compromise. Publicly recognizing the prior work of others preserves dignity, even when the final decision diverges from recommendations.
- They separate status from substance. Resistance often reflects perceived loss of influence. Assigning visible roles in implementation can transform opposition into shared ownership.
- They move sensitive conversations out of public forums. One-on-one dialogue allows candor without performance. Always remember to praise publicly and punish privately.
- They examine their own ego. Wise presidents ask whether their own insistence on a position reflects institutional interest or personal attachment.

These are not cosmetic gestures. They are core leadership tools.

Why Economics Matters Now

Higher education is operating under extraordinary financial, demographic, and political pressures. Presidential decisions increasingly affect academic and cocurricular programs, personnel, institutional identity, and the future of the institution. These choices inevitably touch the ego.

Ignoring Economics does not make leadership more principled. It makes it less effective.

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Institutions do not resist change; people do. That is why there is a field called “change management”. People resist change most fiercely when they feel diminished, disregarded, or disconnected from the future being imagined. Economics does not replace shared governance or data-driven planning. It complements them by acknowledging the human realities that accompany decision-making and institutional change.

A Word for Aspiring Presidents

Preparation for the presidency rightly emphasizes learning budgets, governance, and strategy. But what often distinguishes presidents who succeed from those who struggle is neither intellect nor experience; it is their ability to navigate Economics.

Aspiring presidents should learn early to ask questions beyond ‘What is the right decision?’

During the debates and the process, they should also ask themselves and use these answers to help facilitate the process:

- Who feels exposed by this decision?
- Who feels unheard or underappreciated?
- Whose identity is tied to the current way of doing things?
- Who feels invisible or fears losing standing?

The answers to these questions can help the president manage the process in a way that stays focused on the subject at hand, as well as those who are advocating for directions, positions, or outcomes. Recognizing the Economics in the room is not about manipulation. It is about stewardship and advancing the institution’s long-term interests while honoring the people who have devoted their careers to it.



An Egonomics Checklist for Presidents

Before finalizing a major decision, consider:

- ✓ Have I identified whose status or identity may feel threatened?
- ✓ Have expertise and prior contributions been acknowledged publicly?
- ✓ Am I confusing the loud or persistent voices with institutional wisdom?
- ✓ Have I addressed sensitive concerns privately when appropriate?
- ✓ Am I confident my own ego is not driving the outcome?

Leadership in the Human Economy

The most effective presidents rarely talk about ego. They instinctively factor it into how they listen, frame decisions, build teams, and navigate conflict. They understand that while higher education prides itself on rational discourse, it is ultimately led and sustained by human beings.

Managing the economy of Egonomics may be one of the most underappreciated, yet essential, leadership skills in higher education today.

For trustees and boards: the effectiveness of a president is shaped not only by the decisions you approve, but by how well you understand and manage the human egos that determine whether those decisions succeed.



Dr. Devorah Lieberman joined The Phoenix Philanthropy Group as a senior consultant. She also serves as senior advisor to the president of the American Council on Education, consultant to the International Association of University Presidents, executive coach to institutional presidents and others who aspire to be presidents, and sits on multiple for-profit and not-for-profit Boards.