

THE PHOENIX PHILANTHROPY GROUP

Presidential Leadership: Are You Building the Relationships You Think You Are?

DR. DEVORAH LIEBERMAN

PRESIDENTS CORNER

Welcome to the November 2026 issue of The Phoenix Philanthropy Group's Presidents Corner e-newsletter. As we close out another year of insights and perspectives from our Senior Consultants, we're grateful for your engagement with this bi-monthly newsletter and hope the ideas and information we share continue to support and inspire you in your important leadership roles.

This month's topic, "Presidential Leadership: Are You Building the Relationships You Think You Are," grew out of Senior Consultant Devorah Lieberman's experiences with faculty, staff, students, trustees, vendors and countless others during her 12-year tenure as President of the University of LaVerne.

What if one of the most consequential pitfalls in a university presidency is misunderstanding the relationships we are building?

A president may experience a relationship as professional, while a colleague experiences it as personal. A relationship that feels deeply meaningful during a presidency may feel temporary to the other person. And a president may assume a connection will continue after leaving office, only to discover that the relationship was tied to the role all along.

It wasn't that someone did anything wrong. Rather, their expectations were simply different.

Effective presidential leadership requires far more than management and oversight. It calls for the ability to create, navigate, and sustain relationships with intention, empathy, and sound judgment.

Presidents interact with faculty, staff, students, trustees, alumni, donors, community leaders, elected officials, business leaders, parents, consultants, vendors, and countless others. Some relationships last minutes or hours. Others endure throughout a presidency. A fortunate few last for decades.

Over my 12-year presidency and in the years since, I have found it helpful to consider these relationships through three distinct lenses:

Situational. Seasonal. Durable.

This framework helps ask why a relationship exists, what each person expects, and what behavior is appropriate. Misaligned expectations can turn even a well-intentioned relationship into disappointment or mistrust.

Situational Relationships: Purpose, Clarity, and Boundaries

A situational relationship exists to accomplish a specific purpose and generally has a clear beginning and end. It may be warm, respectful, enjoyable, and mutually

© COPYRIGHT 2026 THE PHOENIX PHILANTHROPY GROUP

rewarding, but its central purpose is transactional: we are working together to accomplish something.

Consider a university inviting a nationally recognized speaker to deliver a commencement address. The president may spend considerable time planning the event, discussing the university, preparing remarks, hosting the speaker, and participating in the ceremony. Genuine warmth and connection may develop, but the relationship is fundamentally situational.

The same may be true of an architect working on a campus project, a consultant leading strategic planning, a lawyer handling a particular matter, or a vendor providing a service.



Situational does not mean impersonal or inferior. Effective situational relationships are professional, appreciative, and respectful. Clarify the purpose, expectations, and timeline; communicate consistently; and express genuine appreciation when the work is complete.

The key is clarity. We can be warm without unintentionally suggesting, “We are becoming lifelong friends.”

I learned this myself. At times, my genuine warmth and hospitality were interpreted as an invitation to an ongoing personal relationship. When that was not my intention, I had to recalibrate. The lesson was not to become less warm. It was to become more intentional about what my warmth communicated.

Seasonal Relationships: The Relationships of the Presidency

Seasonal relationships develop through repeated interactions, shared experiences, growing trust, and an increasing understanding of one another. Often, they exist for a particular institutional or professional season, sometimes the duration of a president’s tenure.

A trustee, for example, may work closely with a president for years. Together, they navigate difficult decisions, budget challenges, strategic planning, institutional celebrations, donor cultivation, and moments of uncertainty. They travel, attend dinners, share experiences, and develop mutual trust. The relationship can be deeply meaningful, even if it remains connected to the season of the presidency.

These relationships require listening, consistency, transparency, appreciation, trust, and clarity about roles. A president should not assume that every meaningful relationship developed during a presidency will become a lifelong friendship. Some will. Others will not.

Several of my own relationships with faculty, staff, and board members continued after my presidency and remain important to me. Others did not. I had expected

© COPYRIGHT 2026 THE PHOENIX PHILANTHROPY GROUP

some to become durable relationships, and I was disappointed when they did not. Over time, I came to understand an important truth: a meaningful relationship is not necessarily a permanent (durable) relationship.

That realization does not diminish what the relationship meant. A relationship can be valuable, consequential, and authentic within the season it occupies. Its worth is not measured only by how long it lasts.

Durable Relationships: When the Person Matters Beyond the Position

Durable relationships are relational rather than transactional. They are not dependent on a particular title, institution, project, power dynamic, or season. They endure because people genuinely value, respect, and enjoy one another.



"These relationships can become great gifts of a presidency. They cannot be manufactured; they evolve through mutual care and nurturing over time."

A trustee may become a lifelong friend. A colleague may become a trusted confidant. A community leader may remain an important part of a president's life long after the presidency ends. The relationship continues because the people, not their positions, matter to one another.

Durable relationships survive changes in title, institution, geography, and circumstance. In them, the other person no longer needs you to be "the president." You know each other as human beings, often including one another's families, interests, hopes, and challenges. There is room for honesty, disagreement, vulnerability, humor, mutual support, and genuine affection.

These relationships can become great gifts of a presidency. They cannot be manufactured; they evolve through mutual care and nurturing over time.

Where Relationships Become Difficult: Misaligned Expectations

Perhaps the greatest challenge is not deciding what we believe a relationship to be. It is trying to understand what the other person believes it to be.

Imagine a president who is warm and attentive to a consultant working with the university for six months. The president invites the consultant to dinner, makes introductions, shares institutional stories, and expresses sincere appreciation. The president may simply be welcoming and grateful. The consultant, however, may interpret these gestures as signs of a developing personal friendship.

When the project ends, the president turns to other priorities. The consultant expects continued invitations, calls, access, or attention. When those do not materialize, the consultant may feel rejected or misled. The president may be surprised: "I was simply being warm."

Neither intended harm, but they experienced the relationship differently.

© COPYRIGHT 2026 THE PHOENIX PHILANTHROPY GROUP

This is why emotional intelligence and empathy are essential to presidential leadership. We must be attuned to how our words and actions are received, not merely confident in what we intended.

The Danger of Performative Intimacy

Presidents are expected to be gracious: hosting dinners, attending receptions, remembering names, making introductions, and expressing appreciation. These behaviors matter.

But professional warmth can unintentionally become performative intimacy. If a president acts as though someone is a close friend when the relationship is situational or seasonal, that person may reasonably expect the same level of closeness to continue. When it does not, the president may be perceived as inconsistent, inauthentic, or untrustworthy.

The answer is not to become colder or more guarded. It is to become more intentional. Warmth and boundaries are not opposites; they are partners. We can treat people with generosity and care without implying a commitment we do not intend to make.

What Each Relationship Requires

These three lenses help us lead with greater clarity.



Situational relationships need clarity. Clarify purpose, expectations, and timelines; communicate consistently; and express appreciation. Avoid implying an ongoing personal relationship unless that is truly intended. When the work is complete, bring the relationship to a thoughtful close. A sincere thank-you does not require a promise of forever.



Seasonal relationships need investment. Listen, communicate regularly, recognize contributions, and be transparent about institutional decisions and the other person's interests. Invest in the relationship while maintaining appropriate presidential boundaries. Remember that a season may last two years, ten years, or an entire presidency. Its value is not diminished simply because it has an ending.



Durable relationships need authenticity. They grow through respect, vulnerability, generosity, and mutual investment, not because one person needs something from the other, but because both value the connection. Perhaps their greatest gift is that eventually you no longer need to be the president. You can simply be yourself.

© COPYRIGHT 2026 THE PHOENIX PHILANTHROPY GROUP

Leading With Generosity and Boundaries

The best presidential relationships are neither cold nor merely transactional. They are generous, genuine, and have appropriate boundaries. Presidents can invest deeply in people without assuming every relationship will last far into the future. We can express appreciation without creating obligations, welcome friendship without manufacturing it, and recognize that two people may experience the same relationship differently.

The presidency is a season filled with extraordinary human connections. Some people enter our lives because of a particular project. Some walk beside us throughout a chapter of institutional leadership. A fortunate few remain long after the presidency has ended.

We cannot always control what a relationship becomes. We can, however, control how thoughtfully and genuinely we participate in it. We can be present, act with integrity, and respect both the relationship and the person before us.

This relationship philosophy not simply relationship management. It is leadership grounded in humanity.

The wisdom is not to rank relationships by duration, or to feel disappointed when every connection does not become permanent. It is to recognize what each relationship is, understand what it asks of us, and value what it offers while we share it.

Situational. Seasonal. Durable.

Three simple words. A powerful lens for presidential leadership and a reminder that the measure of our leadership lies not only in what we accomplish, but in how thoughtfully we connect with the people who help make that work possible.



Dr. Devorah Lieberman, Senior Consultant for The Phoenix Philanthropy Group, was the first female president (serving 2011-2023) of the 135-year-old University of La Verne, a private not-for-profit university in Southern California. Under Devorah's visionary leadership, the University of La Verne was designated as a Hispanic/Minority Serving Institution, the endowment quadrupled from $36 million to $151 million, nearly $175 million was raised, and over $30 million was secured in corporate, foundation, and government funding. Dr. Lieberman is also senior advisor to the President of the American Council on Education, Consultant to the International Association of University Presidents, President-in-Residence at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, and Workforce Initiative Lead for the LA Area Chamber of Commerce.

© COPYRIGHT 2026 THE PHOENIX PHILANTHROPY GROUP