

EXECUTIVE THOUGHT PARTNER

“My Last VP Said They Didn’t Have Time to Coach”

Case Study 04 • Small Regional Institution • University Relations Restructure

Representative case. Details generalized to protect confidentiality.

THE LEADER

A president of a small regional college facing one of the most consequential organizational decisions of his tenure. Enrollment pressure was real — a 60% discount rate, every freshman class dollar stretched thin, and philanthropy no longer a nice-to-have but an institutional survival lever. He was preparing to collapse advancement, communications, and marketing into a unified University Relations division.

On paper, it was a structural question. In practice, it was much heavier than that.

WHAT HE SAID THE PROBLEM WAS

“I’m trying to figure out how to define this new VP role.”

— The President, entering the conversation

WHAT THE PROBLEM ACTUALLY WAS

The structural question was real — but it wasn’t first. What sat underneath it was this: his former VP of Advancement had explicitly told him they didn’t have time to coach their team. That coaching was secondary to fundraising. The president had accepted that framing long enough that it had quietly shaped every assumption he carried about what an advancement leader was supposed to be.

He was about to design a new role using a broken model as the reference point.

- A VP who’s deep in a major gift portfolio isn’t leading — they’re competing with their own team.
- Personal production and departmental strategy are not the same thing.
- Hiring for activity without defining leadership is how the cycle repeats.

The real conversation wasn’t about org charts. It was about what leadership in advancement actually looks like — and why a VP who conflates personal fundraising activity with institutional strategy leaves their team, and their president, exposed.

THE WORK

One conversation. No agenda, no deliverable, no intake form. Just two leaders sitting in the discomfort of a decision that had more history in it than either expected.

“What did your former VP actually own — and what did they leave for everyone else to figure out?”

— The question that opened the room

What surfaced was a pattern familiar in small advancement shops: a high-performing individual contributor wearing a VP title. Someone who raised money but never built the team’s capacity to raise money without them. A president who had, understandably, rewarded the activity because the gifts came in — without seeing the ceiling it created.

From there, we worked through what University Relations actually requires at an institution running a 60% discount rate: a VP whose portfolio is intentionally small. Whose primary job is strategy, staff development, and cross-functional integration. Whose success is measured not by what they personally close, but by what the team produces around them.

We also mapped the specific tension that comes with consolidating advancement, communications, and marketing under one roof — the cultural gaps, the competing definitions of “result,” and what a unified leader must hold without collapsing either function into the other.

THE SHIFT

The president stopped trying to write a job description and started defining a leadership philosophy first. The role clarified once he was clear on what he’d actually been missing — not a fundraiser, but a builder. Not someone to carry the portfolio, but someone to architect the system and develop the people inside it.

He also named something he hadn’t said out loud before: his former VP’s refusal to coach wasn’t a time management issue. It was a leadership identity problem. And without this conversation, he would have unknowingly hired for the same thing again.

- The search criteria shifted from production history to leadership philosophy.
- The VP profile was rebuilt around coaching capacity, not personal close rate.
- The president entered the search knowing what he would not accept again.

THE OUTCOME

The University Relations model moved forward — with a position description built around strategic leadership, not personal production. The president had language he didn’t have before: for what he needed, for what had been missing, and for how to recognize the difference in a candidate.

“I came in thinking I had an org chart problem. What I actually had was a decade of inherited assumptions about what advancement leadership is supposed to look like. One conversation changed how I’m building this.”

— President, Small Regional Institution

WHAT ETP DID

One conversation. No deliverables, no retainer, no consulting engagement. Just the right questions in the right sequence — creating the space for a president to hear himself think clearly about a decision he'd been circling for months.

That's the work.

EXECUTIVE THOUGHT PARTNER

Dr. Daniel Freeman, Ed.D.

I create structured conversations for leaders who already carry the answers.

Not coaching. Not consulting.

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