

Faced with mounting financial and enrollment challenges, a university's underperforming leadership embraced a bold conflict-resolution strategy that aligned a fragmented team and sharpened its collective decision-making.

The challenge

At a critical time for the university's executive leadership, it was clear that something was not working. Internal strife and divisiveness among members of the president's cabinet had made it nearly impossible to reach consensus on crucial matters — just when strong, decisive leadership was most needed.

Increasingly, when decisions were made, they were later reversed, further eroding trust among team members. Several high-performing leaders began exploring opportunities elsewhere.

The university was already facing serious enrollment and financial pressures. Without intervention, the leadership breakdown threatened to spiral into a full-blown crisis.

Our solution

Segal's team began by meeting individually with each member of the president's cabinet to understand their perspectives, frustrations and aspirations. These candid talks revealed deep-rooted issues around trust, competition and decision-making. We synthesized the findings into a clear, informed summary that highlighted shared concerns and opportunities for change.

With this foundation, we facilitated a two-day leadership retreat designed to surface tensions, rebuild trust and establish new norms. The retreat culminated in the development of a set of operating agreements — mutually defined principles to guide how the team would work together moving forward.

Crucially, the president acted on the team's feedback by removing a particularly divisive cabinet member. This bold move signaled a commitment to change and gave the remaining leaders assurance that their voices mattered. Several cabinet members then engaged in one-on-one coaching with Segal to strengthen their communication skills and help them put into practice more productive conversation strategies with their colleagues.

The results

The transformation was both rapid and profound.

Cabinet members emerged from the retreat energized and aligned. Decision-making became more efficient and purposeful. The team began tackling the university's financial and enrollment challenges with renewed focus and cohesion.

What could have been, at the nadir, a very public unraveling of leadership for a prestigious eastern U.S. institution instead became the catalyst for a meaningful and positive new direction.

The university retained its top talent, avoided reputational damage and positioned itself to navigate its considerable challenges with clarity and confidence.

The entire engagement — from discovery to retreat to coaching — took just four months. But the impact of the new processes and strategies put in place are already reshaping the organization's trajectory for the long term.

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