More on presidency

Is MIT man necessary?

By Harold Fedrow

The major premise that has gone unchallenged in discussion about MIT's new president is that he will be someone new associated with MIT. But is this necessarily good? It may very well be the case that MIT itself is a problem, riddled with things that are wrong. The major change in MIT, then, might be to a new president, not to MIT itself. MIT was not in the first place the president's problem. The administration of the president is the problem. The problem is that MIT is the institution which is the problem.

One of the major advantages of having someone new at MIT as MIT's president would be that he would be new, the new president at MIT would be a fresh, new, and untried model for MIT.

In the course of teaching and working at MIT, a person naturally makes friends and enemies, and it is very likely that the president at MIT would start without that problem.

It is all too true, as many a college president selection committee has pointed out, that replacing a college president is not the easiest job in the world.

This would mean that people who know him will certainly have an advantage over those who do not. It is probably the best thing that he will be reluctant to change, even though he might be reluctant, and change might well be needed.

Any person coming from MIT would be known to the people there. This would make it easier to leave MIT's way of doing things. A non-IT person now at MIT would not have to overcome any initial reserve on the part of those who might, despite their helpfulness, still regard him as an outsider, at least until they got used to him.

Lest one think, however, that the advantages are all one-sided, let us consider the other side of the issue. A non-IT person could certainly be made aware of MIT's ways in which things are done at MIT, and an initial period of good-will would certainly help in this. But, and this could be crucial, he would not be reluctant to change, even drastically, if he were convinced that the changes were necessary.

When MIT changed presidents five years ago, MIT was not in the mode of a new administration, not of its goals and purposes. Now we are. As part of that examination a good deal of thought is being given to the nature of the system of government we should have at MIT. With all due respect to President Johnson, really fundamental change in the president's office would probably not have occurred. This is for the simple reason that, as one administrator put it, the Corporation would be very reluctant to change that office with someone in it. With the office vacant, there is no incumbent to offend, or who might be reluctant, and change would be much easier to accomplish.

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