

## **Managing People: Five Tips for Success in the Academic Environment**

### **TIP 1: Understand the Organization. (Look around you).**

It may seem trite, but the starting point is always to understand the organization constraints you face, and the support available to you. You must know your assets and their limitations, and the personalities of the players in the drama. As George C. Patton observed, "I would rather have [the enemy] in front of me than [passive and unsupported troops] behind me."

Develop and use resources. Don't go it alone. These resources can include formal campus resources, ad hoc groups, former chairs, other chairs, trusted faculty and the like for many decisions. Some decisions will require involvement of counsel and exploration of issues within the umbrella of the attorney-client privilege. Whatever you do, find the rules and the resources, and follow them.

### **TIP 2: Understand History (Look behind you).**

In addressing any issue, first take a step back and understand the history of the problem. Nothing pays greater dividends than time spent in getting important background to a dispute. History colors expectations. History provides clues. History helps identify resources and pitfalls. The answer to today's riddles often lies in yesterday's clues. This is especially true in personnel matters, since most personnel problems are based on dissonance in expectations.

Simply put, "Don't ever take a fence down until you know why it was put up." Robert Frost.

As a corollary, make a commitment right now to educate your successor. A good tutorial saves much wandering in the desert. Make that promise now.

### **TIP 3: Build Consensus Through Good Issue Management.**

#### The culture of autonomy

As a leader among equals, your success as a manager will be largely affected by your ability to build consensus among your faculty. As one department chair put it, "The job isn't figuring out what the right thing is and then doing it...it's helping people figure out what the right thing to do is and helping them believe it was their idea."

Of course, the problem is that spoken of by Shakespeare: All the world's a stage. It's just that sometimes the players don't line up as you would like them. You may find yourself embroiled in faculty battles resembling academic firestorms. Will Rogers was only half right when he said "A difference of opinion is what makes horse racing and missionaries." He forgot to include academics.

The reasons are likely simple. As one commentator observed: "Faculty are brought up to be completely autonomous...there's no consensus. It's: I'm smarter than you are, I'm bigger than you are, I have a higher citation index than you do. Professors...pick the job because they get to do whatever they damn well please."

### The importance of consensus.

While in the short term, debate has its important place, in the long term creating and obtaining consensus is vital for department health.

Consensus is vital for at least these reasons:

- *You need it for strategic issues.* Debates on issues can paralyze action until a consensus can be developed firmly in one direction or the other. Once this occurs, there may still be real problems but they can then be identified and managed.
- *You need it for policy and personnel determinations.* One department comes to mind in which the debate rages between hiring faculty with good teaching skills and hiring faculty with research and theoretical skills. The camps, like the Hatfields and McCoys, see all of their experience and interactions via the lens of “which clan do you belong to,” thus paralyzing other simple policy initiatives.
- *You need it to team build.* Consensus may be countercultural in the academy. From graduate school on, faculty are taught to be independent thinkers and to do critiques. It is counterintuitive for them to think or act like a team. And yet, many significant departmental tasks must be delegated to teams, teams that can function effectively.
- *You need it to make decisions stick.* Without consensus the likelihood increases that a chair decision may get challenged, or downright undermined.
- *You need it to avoid chronic debates in which “old tapes” and retained injustices permeate the debate over new ideas.* If divisions are not dealt with they will surface again and again, and will poison the smallest matters and make progress at every level painful and slow.

### Styles of leadership affecting the building of consensus

First, recognize that there are differing techniques. To Napoleon, there were but two “levers for moving men-interest and fear.” There are in fact many others. Here are some samples of styles you might consider in leading debate and formulating consensus.

**The Total Consensus Approach:** In this pattern, the chair is entirely apparently neutral. In framing a debate, the chair refrains from lobbying, expressing an opinion, or advocacy. Issues are presented to the group with a sort of neutral, detached introduction: “One point of view is X... another point of view might be Y...”

This approach dignifies participants, builds trust in the process and trust in your neutrality. In this role you are but a trusted servant; you do not govern. It embraces the wisdom of Lao Tsu: “To lead the people you must walk behind them.”

However it may also lead to very poor outcomes. As a wise man once quipped: “If you don’t



stand for something, you'll fall for anything." It may also result in analysis paralysis, and perpetual schism. You may not be able to act when action would be advantageous.

**The Strong Chair Approach:** In this pattern, the chair presents the problem and the solution simultaneously: "We will do this." Debate is short.

The advantages of this approach are that it is decisive, action oriented, and moves things through the agenda to action. The disadvantages, however, are several.

First, departments that use this approach may simply hastened the filing of suit, a suit in which the rancor evident between colleagues played a major role. Second, if leadership is viewed as a bit dictatorial, it can lead to defections and loss of talent. ("Power corrupts ...") Third, in its more benign forms, the identification of a predetermined winning line of action often leads to passive aggressive outcomes. The great philosopher Herbert Spencer reminded us: "Who is convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." While participants might voice agreement, to keep the peace, their deeply held divisions and concerns become squelched and find other expression.

**The Inspired Choices/Opinion Leader Approach:** This approach recognizes that, as Napoleon said, "a leader is a dealer in hope." Here, to get people to go where you think they should go you must move them, not follow them, but not by telling them what to do.

Keith Evans was a British barrister and trainer of trial lawyers on both sides of the pond. In Newtonian mimicry, he coined, among others, Evans' Second Law of Advocacy: "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." You cannot simply dictate a decision and expect it to be embraced.

This approach avoids the "push back" of the strong leader model, while also avoiding the endless drifting of a perpetual town meeting.

It requires patience and planning. New ideas are notorious for drawing opposition. As John Locke said, "New opinions are always suspected, and usually opposed, without any other reason but because they are not already common."

In this approach you do not abandon your vision (No. 1), or jam down your vision (No.2), but to get it in place, follow this rule:

"To get others to come into our ways of thinking, we must first go over to theirs; and from that place help them see the road." (paraphrasing William Hazlitt)

Suggested steps for building consensus using the Inspired Choices/Opinion Leader Approach.

1. See, and dignify, the apparently valid points in each or all sides of the matter. This is a very good technique in any negotiation.
2. Identify a decision point in your own mind, a date by which the matter should be resolved.
3. Frame the issues in dispute in your own mind. Seek out the opinion leaders on both sides for

their input so you really understand their views and the reasons for them. That way, when you state the issue you will have credibility.

4. Be sure both sides of the issue are well developed. Use meetings, white papers, and similar techniques. Use sounding boards. Use kitchen cabinets.
5. Never ever lose faith in the group conscience. Be willing to be guided by their outcome, so long as you are sure they have been provided with the truly relevant information.
6. With ample notice, call the question. Ask for their help in coming to a consensus, and tell them why you need it. If you find they are still deeply divided, do not move forward on a close vote unless absolutely necessary or legally required. If the outcome is in doubt, use straw votes first. Remember, there is a notion in Washington that nothing happens on the hill that is not precisely known in advance.
7. When it is done, thank all sides and move on.

There is power in this process. Everyone needs to be heard. And if you maintain a sense of group responsibility by not stealing power from them, they will return your grace with equal grace in accepting defeat on an issue. This is shared governance in action.

#### **TIP 4: Learn to Work with Diverse Personalities.**

We now come to perhaps the most difficult part of the job: effective dealings with those who cannot, or will not, work cooperatively with others. Sometimes it likely seems that entire days and weeks are consumed by this noisome lot. To paraphrase one observer:

“Let’s face it. Some academicians don’t usually gravitate to their chosen profession because they have superb ‘people’ skills. At times the best description for the chair’s job is a ‘cross between a hall monitor and a suicide-hotline staffer.’”

Let us consider a few of the typical characters in these little dramas.

**Challenge One:** The Whiner, whose nasal, lip-curved alto sing song “nuh huh” negativity causes you to avoid him or her at all costs.

- Problem: You can’t stand dealing with them. It causes you hives, anxiety, or worse.
- Tip: Always place principles before personalities. Learn to listen thru the angst to the message. Have them write if need be. But do not dismiss the whiner. Like bad pennies, they will keep showing up.
- What often happens is that a chair avoids dealing with whiners/complainers and, because they are difficult to work with, doesn’t put them on committees or other service functions. Not surprisingly, the faculty member then believes he or she is being discriminated against because of gender, race or other factors when in fact it is an issue of personality.

Possible resolutions (in addition to those already mentioned):

- Mentor the faculty member rather than alienate (or identify someone else to).



- Discuss with faculty member (and document) issues of collegiality and cooperation.
- Focus on interests (rather than right or wrong).

**Challenge Two: The Naysayer.**

- Problem – A negative, perpetual naysayer can filibuster or stall any progress on departmental issues.
- First, take their inventory: They love being in the problem, rather than in the solution. Understand that dynamic.
- Strategy: Make them be part of the solution so they can no longer simply dwell in the problem. Make them be in charge of something. Machievelli would call this coopting, but it can also be effective in some cases.

**Challenge Three: The Montagues and the Capulets**

It's two warring colleagues, or groups.

- The Problem -they are vying for power on the department battlefield, and their dispute leaks into all parts of department life, even into tenure and other file reviews. They take shots, impugn each other's integrity, and poison the atmosphere.
- The Solution- You must intervene. Faculty are free to be hard on ideas, but they must be easy on reporters of ideas. Principles and personalities are two different matters, and the latter has no place on the field of ideas. But you must be careful not to pick sides, regardless of your views.

Like Voltaire, though you disapprove of what they have to say, you must defend to the death their right to say it, so long as "it" is the core idea, and not an attack on the personality or motives of those holding other ideas. In the end, you must "stay above the fray".

Look for ways to build consensus, and apply the techniques outlined in the previous section.

**TIP 5: Support Faculty/Staff and Faculty/Student Relationships.**

"This is the final test of a gentleman: his respect for those who can be of no possible service to him." William Lyon Phelps

We are not referring here to supporting inappropriate unconsented or consensual sexual relations between faculty and students/staff. We are talking about managing the supervisor/supervisee and mentor/mentee relationships of the faculty. Clearly a chair has a responsibility to assure that employees in the department are not retaliated against, sexually harassed, and the like. But a chair's role when a faculty member is being "uncollegial" but not necessarily "illegal" is less clear. Examples of such behaviors include faculty bullying of students and staff, hurt feelings, staff who experience being ignored, yelled at, dismissed, criticized, or otherwise handled by

faculty in a way they do not like. The perception, if not the reality, is that nothing can be done to faculty for this type of behavior.

It is vital, first, to understand how important this issue is. A vast array of studies indicates that the prime motivator in a workplace is simple recognition. The data suggest that no matter how informal, simple recognition means more than raises, medals, or formal reviews. The converse is also true. Humiliation, public criticism or cold shoulder shunning effectively ensure breeding resentment and discontent.

If, then, issues about faculty treatment of staff or students arise, resist the temptation automatically to side with your colleague. In these matters it is important to support the staff or student without being unnecessarily critical of the faculty member. Here are tips on how to get good results:

1. Learn to listen so you can listen to learn.
2. Do the little things to show support to staff persons. One kind word lights up the sky on an otherwise dismal day.
3. Where necessary, say something to the faculty member. Remember that many faculty have not received training on effective leadership. Impart your knowledge of laws and policies, and stress the importance of collegiality.
4. If the perceived misconduct is reported or perceived as harassment, discrimination or retaliation, promptly notify academic affairs and/or human resources.
5. If the problem is that faculty are operating oblivious to deadlines, thus causing angst among staff or students, impart to them how the little administrative things are just as important as the big ideas.
6. Establish as a culture that collegiality is expected and bullying not acceptable. Raise the issue in a personnel file if necessary.
7. If necessary limit faculty interaction with staff (withdraw use of services).
8. Remember to consult with academic affairs and/or human resources for support and ideas about how to proceed. You are not in this alone, and you should reach at any point if you are in doubt as to how to proceed.



## **Managing People – Working Effectively with Your Department**

### **Scenario One**

The department has met an entire year to discuss changes to the curriculum. A majority of the members (seven) want to add two new courses, international development and research methods. Two members, who have questioned the addition of these courses all along, continue to argue that they are not needed. At the first meeting, the following semester, you again allow both sides to restate their arguments and find the stalemate remains. You have made known that you think the courses are great additions. Yet, you fear that letting this discussion continue too much longer will create unnecessary fatigue and tension within the department. What do you do?

How might you address this using the Total Consensus Approach? The Strong Chair Approach? The Inspired Choices/Opinion Leader Approach?

Which strategy do you think is most effective and why?

### **Scenario Two**

The department has just received a yearly endowment of \$3000 used at their discretion. Half of the faculty wants to use the funds to support student research (i.e., travel funds, registration fees, hotel room, etc.). The other half wants to use the funds for faculty development within the department. Each side argues that splitting the amount between the two is not enough. Each side also argues that the other can apply for funds from the university, that is, students and faculty have other sources of funding. Discussion about what to do with the money has occurred over a semester. As chair, you think that a resolution must be reached soon. What do you do?

How might you address this using the Total Consensus Approach? The Strong Chair Approach? The Inspired Choices/Opinion Leader Approach?

Which strategy do you think it most effective and why?

### **Scenario Three**

You have done your homework and know the stories behind the tensions between two of your departmental colleagues. You, and everyone else, notice that they each takes pot shots at the other during departmental meetings and openly criticize one another in social settings. You have remained neutral meeting each one in their office to hear their qualms about the other, ultimately, encouraging each one to maintain collegiality. However, this suggestion has not worked, and interaction between them has taken a turn for the worst with each yelling at one another during a departmental meeting. What do you do at this moment?

Are any of the approaches (Total Consensus Approach, Strong Chair Approach, The Inspired Choices/Opinion Leader Approach) appropriate and effective?

## Scenario Four

A junior within the major meets with you to complain that a senior colleague is an ineffective instructor. According to the student, he does not discuss the assigned readings in class; he often strays, going on tangents that do not address the topic at hand. Also, he does not return work in a timely manner (it took her a month to give back the last exam). He is sometimes rude to students, openly mocking them when they wrongly respond to his queries. You have chatted with several other students who have enrolled in his courses and they all say similar things. You have also heard similar comments from other colleagues (even from other departments). You are hesitant to approach the senior colleague because he will serve on your DPC next semester and has been warm and friendly towards you for quite some time. In fact, he nominated you as chair. What do you do?

Are any of the approaches (Total Consensus Approach, Strong Chair Approach, The Inspired Choices/Opinion Leader Approach) appropriate and effective?