

COMMENTARY

Lessons From a Recovering Department Chair

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Academic department chairs are usually pulled from successful faculty roles only to enter a world of mid-level management and leadership roles rarely anticipated when initiating one's career. Fortunately, the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy provides opportunities for professional development related to some of the skills required of department chairs. Unfortunately, learning to apply that skill set is neither a linear process nor consistent across varied types of challenges.

While learning to be an effective department chair will require a series of trials and errors, often, there isn't enough time for a department chair to make every misstep. Now a year out from 15 years of service as a department chair, I find myself reflecting on the lessons I've learned from colleagues and from my own personal experience. In hopes of moderating the learning curve of others in this role, I share a few lessons from a recovering department chair.

1. It's not about you

Check your ego at the door. Your primary role is to help colleagues be successful. While no one expects you to set aside your desire for personal achievement, your desire should operate in the background. Attempts to serve as a departmental centerpiece around which others will revolve is rarely successful, takes the focus away from the department, and does not empower junior faculty in their personal development.

2. Find your faculty's vision, and hold on to it

Strategic planning is a messy business that involves divergent opinions, give and take, and compromise in setting priorities. Part of the process includes defining a common vision. Ideally, creating a vision requires everyone's participation and everyone's buy in.

Holding on to that vision will be up to you. The day after your departmental vision is defined, your colleagues

return to their individual labs, clinics, offices, and projects. Each individual has unique challenges that are genuine and require resources, but collectively, the faculty will be looking to you to hold on to that vision. The departmental vision provides a measuring stick against which you can guide decision-making. There is always room to wiggle, but until the faculty regains energy to wipe the table clean and begin a new planning process; hold on.

3. Hire well, then stay out of the way

No decision is more important than the first one. Your department is its faculty. Be certain that your hires complement the departmental vision, that you can support and mentor their development, and that they fit the culture of your department. It can sometimes be challenging, but once an individual is hired, remember that there was a reason he or she was selected. Provide unfailing support, but stay out of their way and clear a path for their success.

Occasionally, there will be conflicts in deciding who to hire between the most outstanding candidate and the candidate who "fits" the department. It's important to be self-aware of any personal biases, and to consider that "fit" does matter. You can hire the best individual in his or her specialty, but if he or she does not complement where the department wants to go or is an individual with whom no one will want to collaborate, you have wasted an opportunity.

4. Listen well, even when it hurts

There is no substitute for keeping "an ear to the ground." Hallway chatter and intentional efforts to connect with faculty on a regular basis are opportunities for you to provide guidance, often preempting a need for intervention later.

Not a fan of hearing problems or critique? As artfully explained in the book *The Four Agreements*, don't take anything personally (or try not to).¹ Frustrations that boil over are often seeded by colleagues' personal or professional struggles of which you may not even be aware. If you routinely view a colleague's critique as a personal affront, you quickly become incapable of

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hearing or understanding the actual message. As a result, you will fail in your primary role to help colleagues be successful.

5. Listen well, with others' ears

It can be surprising for a new chair to discover that, while we are all “friends,” faculty members are aware when they are having a conversation with the person who conducts their annual review. You need another set of ears; a confidant who you can trust to relay concerns you are not hearing. Still, there is a need to evaluate what you are hearing. Just as you rely on a second set of ears to know when a minor concern is becoming a major concern, faculty members are savvy enough to hope a casual conversation with your confidant will indirectly lend urgency to an issue in which they are vested.

6. You can't fix everything; nor should you

Learning to differentiate between what needs to be heard, and what requires your intervention is challenging. A significant proportion of concerns that come to your desk require effective, empathetic listening and reflective questioning; nothing more. The reality is that there are few actual emergencies. Listen, keep your head, choose not to overreact, and at least pretend to stay calm. Reflexive intervention will exhaust all of your available time, and more importantly, fail to support professional growth in faculty members. Empower faculty members to problem solve concerns within their sphere of control.

The best, and perhaps most valuable, advice I consistently received from a mentor early in my administrative role was the statement “I'm sure you'll do the right thing.” At times it seemed a bit flippant, but in that statement I knew I had the authority needed, permission to succeed or fail, and support regardless of the outcome.

Warning. . . . avoiding or delaying intervention may be perceived, on a good day, as procrastination; do it anyway. Working to develop your skill in recognizing when accumulated snippets of information or a specific event actually requires your intervention will prevent your “procrastination” from being perceived as indifference.

7. Engage in strategic, righteous indignation

You serve two masters as a middle manager: your faculty and your dean. Regardless, you do have a bully pulpit; use it selectively.

Right or wrong, there are moments in which an expression of outrage by the department chair can elevate awareness of a concern beyond what an individual faculty member can achieve. Ideally, your involvement solves a problem. Minimally, it is a clear and hopefully accurate

message that your faculty has your support and establishes goodwill you may need in the future.

There are also moments in which a dean, as a consequence of his or her leadership position, may be unable to express an opinion or adequately communicate the urgency of a concern. An expression of righteous indignation from “that excitable department chair with an incomplete understanding” can bring forward needed attention, while allowing the dean to remain politically correct.

Strategic and selective use of the bully pulpit is key. Be certain the situation warrants your outrage and be aware that frequent cries of “the end is near” typically induce deafness and eventually sleep among your intended audience.

8. Be supportive always, but tell the truth

Do not confuse being supportive with ignoring difficult conversations. Evaluating an individual faculty member's performance in a specific situation, or overall, has to be based on your most objective observations. Similarly, your insights should be dynamic allowing for differing levels of progress within a job description and across years.

Equally prevalent are faculty perceptions that: steady or strong performance is inadequate; or modest or weak performance is more than adequate. Failing to recognize and appropriately benchmark strong faculty progress induces anxiety that is unnecessary and counterproductive. Failing to identify and share needed areas for growth denies an opportunity for you and the faculty member to problem solve a path to improvement. Academia is littered with the bodies of faculty members who discovered only when applying for promotion that their performance was not satisfactory, and only slightly fewer bodies of department chairs who were asked to explain why repeated annual reviews painted an unrealistic rosy picture.

9. When needed, be first to ask for help

Nearly without exception, we are not trained or prepared to handle complex human resource concerns. It is critical to clearly understand in these situations that reality is in the eye of the beholder. Your perception of the significance of harassment, discrimination, or misconduct is largely irrelevant to seeking a constructive resolution. Real or perceived, these types of concerns are best handled by human resource professionals. You place all parties involved, including yourself, at risk by ignoring concerns or attempting to go it alone.

Be first, and always encourage faculty to be first, in contacting the appropriate office to seek assistance. Being

first allows you to initiate the meeting with an expert, ideally one with whom you have taken time to develop a relationship. Being first allows that professional to determine significance and next steps. Being first communicates the seriousness with which you take the concern. Being first provides the strongest and most immediate protection to all parties.

10. Take care of yourself

Think it's lonely at the top? Try the middle. Occasionally, you have the responsibility, but not necessarily the authority; and sometimes the authority, but you don't know who is responsible. It's an old but true adage that you cannot care for others without caring for yourself. Find a mentor, take time to nurture relationships inside

and outside your institution, and enrich your life through avocations, not only your vocation.

It is perhaps a patriarchal perspective, but there are few things more fulfilling than to see colleagues succeed and know, or at least hope, that you have made a contribution. The most challenging part of your job are the individuals who look to you to help facilitate their success. If you take their lead, listen well, tell the truth, intervene selectively, and remain unfailingly supportive of their development, you will discover those individuals are also, easily, the most rewarding part of your job.

REFERENCES

1. Ruiz DM. *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*. San Rafael, CA: Amber-Allen Publishing; 1997.