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Establishing the Department's Credibility with Central Administration

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Over a period of ten years I had the opportunity to work as a chair of two departments that needed to establish credibility with central administrators. From 1987 to 1991 I served as Chair of the Department of Communication at SUNY/Geneseo and from 1991 to 1997 as Chair of the Department of Interpersonal Communication at Bowling Green State University, where I also served as Director of the School of Communication Studies from 1995-1998. This paper presents some of the comments I have shared in recent years with a number of faculty, particularly colleagues who attended the workshops I conducted at Bowling Green for new department chairs. Because "ethos" and "credibility" have been central in our theories of communication and persuasion I begin by reminding you of the importance we give to credibility.

Credibility is a powerful concept. Our discipline recognizes credibility as a powerful concept that is central in our research and teaching. Thus, as communication administrators we should be particularly effective in working with our colleagues to establish departmental credibility. I suspect, however, that there are many units that have met with little success in building ethos on their campuses. Evidence of this problem on a national scale was presented to me several years ago after I was asked to deliver the keynote address at the New York State Speech Communication Convention. As part of my preparation I called our national office and spoke with an associate director who was knowledgeable about departmental problems. My rhetorical strategy for the speech was to serve as a cheerleader for the status of our discipline around the country as we entered the mid-1990s. I was told that the NCA was often contacted by departments which were facing one sort of difficulty or another with central administrators. This suggests that, while *credibility* is one of our most important elements in persuasion, departments on a considerable number of campuses need to work to achieve greater credibility in the eyes of their administration.

In this paper, I want to explain what our department did to increase its credibility. These explanations will be blended with ideas for establishing credibility given to me by the three most important administrators I have worked with at Bowling Green State University: President Sidney Ribeau, Provost Charles Middleton, and Dean C.J. Cranny. My comments are organized around four suggestions that form an argument about how to

establish credibility with central administration. These suggestions have proven to be of value to department chairs and were endorsed by the three administrators.

1. Make an honest and accurate assessment of your department in light of the mission and goal statement of your institution. Include an assessment of what the department understands and believes to be the credibility it has with central administration.

2. Determine what your department believes to be its strengths and its weaknesses and develop a reasonable plan to build on strengths and eliminate weaknesses.

3. Determine what activities your college or university values and list them in the order in which your faculty agrees it can best increase its credibility with central administrators.

4. Embrace and implement two important metaphors for working toward increased credibility: team and family. Members of a team work together to strive to be winners and members of a family usually care about each other and the quality of their family life.

The departmental inventory and planning required to follow these suggestions will lead to the development of an action plan that can result in a high level of credibility for a department. The key terms for such a plan include vision, context, promotion, and effective use of resources.

The department must create a vision of what it aspires to become. The faculty must visit this vision regularly in communicating both within its borders and to external constituents who play a key role in the outreach of the mission and the perceived credibility of the department. While the chair of the department may be its key leader, the department must have other leaders; leadership is not the sole responsibility of the chair. A department chair to be effective must be both a good manager and a good leader but, as my dean reminded me several times, leadership should also emerge from others in the department. The leaders must work *collaboratively* to fulfill the mission and achieve the goals set by the department, not as adversaries challenging the authority of the chair.

The credible department must be willing to acknowledge the context it shares with other academic units and link itself to other programs. This point was one that was discussed in particular in my conversations with the provost. Turf wars are not uncommon in our academic environments but combativeness, rather than collaboration, drains valuable energy from the faculty and ultimately leads to diminished departmental credibility with central administration. Far too often departments become overly anxious about "turf," rather than the creation of symbiotic relationships and productive links that blur disciplinary boundaries.

Bowling Green's President Ribeau, who also holds the rank of Professor of Interpersonal Communication, underscored with me his belief that a department must have a faculty and leadership that has a strong sense of where the college or university is going. Key questions he raised in our conversation include: What is the mission of our institution and what are its goals? How do the mission and goals of the department mesh with those of the college or university?

A chair should turn to her or his faculty to seek answers to at least four major questions:

1. What is our college or university attempting to accomplish?

2. How does (or can) our department apply itself to the interests of our university and not just the interests of our discipline and individual career paths?

3. What priorities exist for the university and to what extent and in what ways do we contribute to them?

4. What expectations does our central administration have for our department in regard to the traditional categories of teaching, research, and service and how are these activities defined for us?

- a. How can we meet these expectations and significantly improve our credibility?
- b. What will we do to measure and assess what we are doing and accomplishing?

In these days, when so many institutions are concerned about building and maintaining enrollments, a communication department must be concerned about having a strong curriculum with a realistic balance between "theory" and "skills." Departments offering graduate programs, of course, must maintain a strong and contemporary theoretical commitment and, when educating professionals seeking career paths in organizational settings, the curriculum must be tailored to meet the professional challenges faced by organizations of various types, from media companies to service units to huge corporations.

Promote your department specifically to improve its image. One of the easiest ways to minimize credibility is for a department to fail to promote itself with central administration. Certainly we gain nothing positive by sending our administrators notes on every on-campus or off-campus activity in which our faculty engages. But there are what I call "generic" and unique contributions we can make that are worthy of consideration by our central administrators throughout the year (not just when documentation is necessary for merit increases). Administrators who know little about our discipline can recognize and applaud important achievements that include well written convention or conference papers, innovative teaching strategies, publications in refereed journals, and scholarly books, whether textbooks or reports of research findings. As Chair of the Department of Communication at SUNY Geneseo, I made a regular effort to get good papers and other important achievements to our Vice President for Academic Affairs and we produced a newsletter that was circulated throughout the campus as well as to outside audiences. The newsletter featured reports, stories, and profiles that were rhetorically crafted to increase our credibility. The VPAA always responded with positive messages about those accomplishments we promoted. My current dean has indicated a number of times that promoting the department with "good news" about research and instructional achievements is an excellent way to improve the department's image. Being your campus' "best kept secret" or "little hidden diamond" is not likely to enhance the credibility of your department.

Be a visible member of the campus community. While it is not unusual to find one faculty member in a typical department who plunges herself or himself into a considerable pool of campus committees, it is also not unusual to find a considerable number of faculty members who consciously avoid college or university service. Upon arriving as a new department chair at Bowling Green State University, I was asked by the dean to lead the department back into the campus community, as if I was assigned to a unit that had become essentially an island unto itself. There are a great many college or university committees, task forces, and boards that have important responsibilities, so everyone can participate in activity beyond departmental borders in ways that add credibility to a department. For campuses that value service to professional organizations, faculty must be *strongly encouraged* to become "active" members who participate on panels, boards, interest groups, or caucuses in our associations. This often requires a chair to fight for at least adequate travel funds, give travel expenses priority in an operating budget, and communicate to faculty where and how funds may be discovered elsewhere on campus. Does your institution have faculty development funds? Are probationary faculty on the tenure track provided with any special financial awards for presenting research at a conference or convention? Is there a key official you can locate who has access to travel funds that you do not have who may be willing to support someone with communication research to report? If internal and national visibility is a core value in the action plan of a department, faculty must be motivated to get involved in activities beyond their departmental or personal agendas.

Recognize that high credibility can result in increased resources. My experiences led me to ask our faculty this question: Does our department have a "track record" that matches its resources? Or, if our resources are adequate, are we delivering what our central administration expects? If we do not have adequate resources, how can we obtain what we need from either internal or external sources? Shortly after taking over a position as department chair I began a quest for funding for technology: computers, video editing equipment, supplies, etc. As my rhetorical efforts began, during the honeymoon period new chairs often experience, I found the administration making an effort to provide the equipment and supplies I sought. One associate vice president for academic affairs told me: "John, the other chairs really appreciated the fact that the former chair never argued for much in the way of resources so that left more for them to enjoy." By demonstrating to the central administration that the department had an ambitious vision in line with the one painted by the president, and by taking steps to implement the vision, we were on the receiving end of considerable resources. We also received an obligation to reach goals the resources were to support. Several years ago my dean called to say: "I know your department is still in the black but I have several thousand dollars to give you because we are nearing the end of our second semester and another department has not made the effort to use these funds. Can you use the money?" I am convinced the offer was extended because we had become a credible department which used resources visibly and effectively. Other such instances followed during my years as a communication administrator.

Often, if a department lacks credibility and is in trouble with its central administration, the problem is not that the administrators fail to understand or respect the discipline but that members of the department are caught up in interpersonal and professional struggles that can lead to self destruction. When I have made this sort of claim to chairs, particularly ones in departments that suffered losses in status and resources on their campuses, I raised the ire of more than one chair whose department or programs had been threatened by an administration that, for one reason or another, was believed by faculty to be "out to get the department." But why would administrators (even those pressed by a need to cut departments in order to cut expenses) develop a belief that privileged almost every department on a campus except communication studies or speech communication? Perhaps because faculty became so involved with competing and grumbling among themselves that they could not collaborate to create programs of excellence in activities valued by the college or university. Perhaps internal struggles made it difficult for members of a department to define the unit in any symbiotic relationship to its context. With unresolved and continual conflict in a department, the productive leadership does not emerge and chairs either receive a no confidence vote or toss their keys on the desk and return to full-time teaching, or teaching and research. If a department wants to secure high credibility with the central administration, the faculty must resolve conflict collaboratively and not as adversaries. This is a department that determines what needs to be done, what it is capable of doing, and with both relational and task goals established moves forward with intellectual integrity and collegiality to become a visible and highly respected department on its campus and elsewhere.

The chair who wants to establish credibility must set goals to lead the department to a higher level of standards and achievement. If excellence is to be more than a shallow term for a department, the faculty must agree that reaching for a higher level of performance is necessary and attainable. The department that announces it is doing what it wants to do, is not going to change in positive directions. This is not a department that sees possibilities and then pursues them with passion and determination. On the other hand, the department that is made up of faculty sharing an inferiority complex ("no one respects our program and that is not likely to change") is not unlike the ostrich with its head stuck in the sand. Possibilities and opportunities can neither be seen nor pursued by

this sort of gang. When positive energy gets a department moving and the movement is clearly visible and measurable, high credibility with central administration will be created. As growth continues, the credibility will be maintained if not increased further.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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