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Surviving an Appointment as Department Chair

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IT may well be that no role in the academy is as difficult and demanding as that of academic department chair. Less than one-third of new department chairs have the administrative experience to qualify them for the position (Tucker, 1984, p.1), yet managerial and communication skills are regarded as imperative to success in the job (Jeffrey, 1985). The typical department chair has lower job satisfaction than other administrators (Eble, 1978, p. 72), only moderate satisfaction in performing a job well (Kremer-Hayon & Avi-Itzhak, 1986), and fewer daily rewards than faculty members (Spicer & Staton, 1992, p. xiv).

What, then, is the secret to surviving an appointment as department chair? More than physical endurance, survival requires maintaining social and intellectual equilibrium (psychological survival) so that personalities remain intact, values and aspirations uncompromised by cynicism, and social relationships with colleagues preserved. Professionally, a term as department chair may actually hinder a career by taking time away from reading, writing, and teaching—those activities which enable academics to obtain promotions and collegial recognition (professional survival). In seeking to explore the issue of survival as department chair, three interrelated threats to the well being of chairs will be examined: role conflict, changes in collegial relationships, and job related stress. Finally, reasons for accepting appointment and some practical considerations for chairs who serve in a term appointment are considered.

ROLE CONFLICTS

While 60% of department chairs report a greater level of identification with faculty than with administration (Gmelch & Burns, 1994), a balance of obligations is essential to effective leadership. Departmental faculty must feel confident that the chair is an advocate who attempts to find and utilize the best available arguments in an articulate manner to represent their interests. A chair who is timid, interested in self promotion, or ineffective in thought and speech is not valued. Simultaneously, the chair must disseminate relevant information to the faculty from higher levels of administration.

The question may arise, to whom is primary allegiance owed, the unit or the administration? Successful department chairs should realize that the question constitutes a false

dichotomy. During periods of budget requests, personnel decisions and competition, the chair is clearly an advocate for the unit. However, after input has been legitimately provided and decisions made, it is the responsibility of the department chair to shift roles and to inform the faculty of the decision. The chair must attempt to explain reasons for decisions as honestly as possible and motivate the faculty to work effectively within the resources and organizational constraints that are imposed on the unit. A chair should be willing to fairly represent both constituencies.

Other fragmented role responsibilities are often equally frustrating. While administrators hold chairpersons responsible as department leaders, "many chairpersons believe they are not given sufficient power or authority to carry out the responsibilities of the unit" (Tucker, 1984, p. 6). As units grow and sub-specialties continue to increase, the paradox of departments' need for structure vs. need for independence becomes increasingly salient. "The tension between the need for some hierarchy and exertion of authority as a result of complex organization on the one hand, and the need to encourage autonomy and independence on the other, creates an additional source of ambiguities and conflicts" (Kremer-Hayon & Avi-Itzhak, 1986, p. 106). Finally, the roles of colleague and friend are compromised by responsibilities for evaluation and disbursement of rewards, resulting in problems in interpersonal relations.

An effect of role conflicts for the department chair is the onset of significant job-related stress (Staton-Spicer & Spicer, 1987; Singleton, 1987; Lee, 1985), with some individuals more capable of managing stress than others (Fisher, 1981). Additional possible consequences of role conflict include: isolation, lowered job satisfaction, lowered productivity, and reduced exchange of information (Cummings, Long & Lewis, 1983, pp. 188-189).

Interpersonal Relationships

Tucker (1984) clearly attests to the primary role of collegial relationships within academic departments: "This intimate relationship is not duplicated anywhere else in the university because no other academic unit takes on the ambiance of a family, with its personal interaction, its daily sharing of common goals and interests, and its concern for each member" (p. 5). Tucker points out that department chairs are the only administrators who must live with their decisions and the interpersonal consequences that result from their decisions each day. Those decisions can affect the well being of the chair. King (1986) argues that relationships and communication have greater impact on stress and depression than major life events.

Research indicates that maintaining positive relationships is essential for department chairs. Knight and Holen (1985) investigated the relationship between measures of effectiveness for department chairs and orientations toward consideration and initiating structure. Consideration indicates behaviors associated with friendship, trust, respect and warmth. Initiating structure indicates the establishment of clear lines of organization, communication, relationship and departmental procedure. As expected, both consideration and initiating structure correlated highly with effectiveness as department chair. Roach (1991) studied faculty perceptions of a chair's use of compliance-gaining behaviors. Interpersonal influence perceived as most effective was that which was oriented toward the primacy of the faculty member, avoided the authoritative power of the chair, and constituted low risk to the relationship.

What specific type of relationship should a department chair seek with faculty? Taylor (1992) suggests that effective chairs seek relationships characterized by high degrees of trust and mutual respect. In her view, any mistrust serves to defeat the chair's objective of focusing attention on teaching, research and service. This view is bolstered by Barge and Musambira's (1992) research on turning points in chair/faculty relationships. Trustworthi-

ness changes created the greatest negative modifications in faculty perceptions of chair/faculty relationships and, further, impeded the flow of information between chair and faculty.

How are healthy and trusting chair/faculty relationships promoted? A primary characteristic in establishing a trusting relationship may be equity. Chairs must deal fairly with colleagues, staff and students. Favoritism is fatal. Predictability and integrity are personal characteristics that are also indispensable for the effective department chair (Taylor, 1992). Eble (1978) concludes: "Recognition that people come first and that the wise treatment of human beings is grounded in understanding and caring about them are the fundamentals upon which administrative excellence is built" (p. 81).

A Conspiracy of Mediocrity

A major roadblock for establishing relationships characterized by trust, equity and caring is found in the chair's role as evaluator. Evaluation often produces defensiveness and distance. It can also produce conflict which leads to the formation of coalitions and factions, isolation, and a general lack of cooperation. Given the primacy of positive relationships and the dangers of evaluation and defensiveness, a nefarious temptation presents itself to the department chair. This temptation involves treating faculty entirely as friends and maintaining extremely low degrees of interpersonal distance. Further, the chair is tempted to avoid evaluation whenever possible and, when it is required (as in tenure and promotion reviews and annual merit pay reviews), to provide only positive reinforcement and very little criticism. Tucker (1984, p. 6) describes the tendency to give equal rewards, regardless of merit, as a means of avoiding conflict and threats to interpersonal relationships.

There is a danger for faculty who, consciously or unconsciously accept this "chair-as-sugar-daddy" approach. The danger is that, in the absence of accurate feedback, departmental performance will begin to deteriorate and standards will be lowered. While departmental rhetoric may speak of excellence and standards, a flight from responsibility occurs. The chair maintains faculty support, the faculty are neither irritated nor challenged by the chair and a pleasant life ensues in this conspiracy of mediocrity.

Some ground rules for departments may prevent such calamities while enabling department chairs to survive their appointments and maintain healthy collegial relationships. First, departments should accept the maxim that responsibility is healthy and, rather than being avoided, should be diligently sought. The chair can lead in promoting this view by insisting on regular evaluation by the faculty. Further, the chair's reaction to evaluation should serve as a model for faculty to follow. Second, the faculty of the department should determine criteria for faculty evaluation rather than punting difficult decisions to the department chair. This may be difficult. Faculty may not find it easy to agree on the relative balance of teaching, research and service in the determination of merit pay increases. While all may agree that publication quality is more important than quantity, no one may be willing to agree on the indicators of quality. The process is, however, necessary if the chair is to avoid being caught in the middle. Finally, all departmental citizens must realize that conflicts do occur. Frequently, conflict produces positive outcomes. While open fights should not be tolerated, a healthy department can survive substantial levels of conflict. In fact, faculty may feel empowered by the notion that they can disagree with colleagues or department chairs, debate issues thoroughly, and still come out with relationships and feelings intact. Realization that conflicting views can be shared may lead to a clearing of the air and a healthy communication climate.

JOB-RELATED STRESS

A 1990 study of 101 research and doctorate-granting universities (Gmelch, 1991) indicated department chairs perceive significant loss of time as a trade-off in accepting the position. These chairs reported less time for research (88%), for keeping current in their academic discipline (82%), for teaching (78%) and for student contact (49%). Personal time was also negatively impacted by the responsibilities of the job, including time with family (65%), friends (56%), and for leisure (77%). The study also suggests that an overwhelming number of chairs reporting this loss of time expressed dissatisfaction. In addition to heavy workload, Gmelch (1991) reports a long list of factors perceived to contribute to stress for department chairs: obtaining program approval, decisions affecting others, resolving collegial differences, evaluating faculty, completing paperwork, telephone/visitor interruptions, meetings, and so forth.

Gmelch and Burns refined this analysis of department chair stress in a 1994 study which utilized factor analytic procedures to isolate five primary stress factors. In order, from most to least stressful, these factors included conflict-mediation stress (resolving differences with/among colleagues, obtaining program support), task-based stress (heavy workload, time pressure), professional identity stress (excessively high self expectations), role-based stress (career progress not what it should be, too much responsibility and too little authority) and reward and recognition stress (inadequate salary, incompatible department and institutional goals).

The unique nature of the job itself is a prime contributor of stress for department chairs. Stress from faculty and administrative responsibilities interact to compound one another (Gmelch & Burns, 1993).

Some Effects of Stress

Interactions between sources of stress, levels of stress and individual responses to stress can lead to either positive or negative outcomes. However, the noxious affects of job related stress are noteworthy. Job related stress can have serious physical consequences, including illness and longer recovery periods (Weiskopf, 1980). Many indicators of job performance are negatively impacted by excessive stress (King, 1986) as is job satisfaction (Fisher, 1985; Miller et al., 1990; Miller, Zook & Ellis, 1989).

Job burnout has received a great deal of attention as a long-term consequence of workplace stress. Maslach (1982) defines burnout as a chronic condition, whereas King (1986) suggests that burnout is a natural consequence of the failure to adapt to stress. Smeltzer (1987, p. 48) summarizes this view: "the relationship between social conditions and stress outcomes is mediated through the individual's perception of the situation." Perhaps, over time, department chairs may adapt to stress through altered perceptions and situational expectations. This would explain Gmelch's (1991) claim that stress levels drop as department chairs gain years of experience.

Managing Stress

A common theme in literature related to managing stress and burnout is the central role of communication and support networks (Smeltzer, 1987; Ray & Miller, 1991; King, 1986). Ray and Miller (1991) suggest that supportive communication can reduce stress through clarifying role expectations and reducing uncertainty. For example, social support can promote discussion and lead to the venting of negative feelings. For the department chair, finding a social support system can be problematic. Department faculty may not hold insight into the particular nuances of the chair's unique role. Common advice to department chairs is to develop a strong relationship with the academic dean. An academic dean who shows interest in the problems of a department and its chair may help reduce stress. An-

other common bit of advice is the development of strong collegial relationships with other department chairs. Sharing the frustrations of the job may take the form of simple commiseration, but may also lead to an understanding that one is not alone, and may occasionally lead to the discovery of new ideas and means for dealing with difficult issues.

Eble (1978) recommends a number of strategies for "keeping sane" directed at department chairs. Leaving can involve extended vacation periods or short scheduled breaks during the day. Many chairs operate on a eleven or twelve month contract. While this may be beneficial from a financial standpoint, the ability to take an extended vacation can be extremely helpful in regaining perspective and recreating a sense of mission and optimism. Short, scheduled breaks for reading and reflective thought (or flight from particularly noxious and hopeless situations) may also be beneficial. Eble also recommends strategies as diverse as: purposeful shifts of direction, periodic catching up (with administrative details), writing, teaching, professional travel, and finding one's rhythm and keeping to it. He claims that, "The very diversity of the duties required of an administrator may aid in maintaining sanity" (p. 78).

It is most interesting to note that workload and the time demands of the chair's position are a leading source of stressful feelings. At the same time, workload can, if allowed to, remove many of the daily activities which help to buffer against stress: leisure time, exercise, reading, etc.

CONCLUSION

The department chair may be perceived through the lens of at least two contrasting models (Deetz, 1992). The first, an organizational model, stresses the power, authority, and reward inherent in the position. Students and constituents external to the university regard the position as a mark of distinction and respect. Faculty, however, are far less impressed and often suspicious of individuals who actually aspire to the position. A second, more traditional service function may be deemed the community of scholars model. Based upon this model, administration is a necessary function that one may be called upon to perform, for the good of the academy, until one can go back to the more important tasks of teaching and research. Essentially, an individual may aspire to be chair in order to either be something or to do something. While these categories are certainly not discreet, the aspirations and motives of faculty who accept appointments as academic administrators play a major role in their abilities to function effectively and to survive the position intact, both personally and professionally.

There is nothing inherently wrong with aspiring to be something. Both positive (initiative, self-esteem, enterprise) and negative (haughtiness, conceit, amour propre) characteristics can be associated with the motivation. Many individuals aspire to careers in academic administration, perceiving the daily pressures to be challenging and the rewards (big salary and big office) to be greater. Some who do not aspire to careers in administration may, as department chairs, discover administrative talents and capabilities which convince them to continue. Some faculty may grow weary of teaching and research and perceive administrative work as an opportunity to rejuvenate a career. Finally, a few may measure personal success by their impact on the direction of an institution, concluding that "to be something is to do something."

For many department chairs, however, accepting the appointment is an opportunity to contribute to the viability and growth of an academic department. This motivation is not nearly as noble as it sounds. Inherent in this desire to do motivation is the assumption that, "I can lead the department more effectively than anyone else." This belief may reflect arrogance, stupidity, poor judgment, or a reasoned conclusion based on careful examination of

alternatives. The opportunity should, however, orient department chairs toward the more noble goals of leadership and away from the grind of daily management tasks.

While faculty interested in a career in administration expect to move up or out, most department chairs (65%) return to faculty status and only 19% continue in higher education administration (Gmelch & Burns, 1994). Faculty who accept temporary appointment as chair must face problems stemming from eventual return to status as a regular faculty member. This return means that the chair must live in the world that she or he has created. Bothersome department policies and precedents may boomerang on the past chair. In addition, time taken from teaching and research may place the former chair at a competitive disadvantage since promotion in the academy is tied to these basic duties. Finally, the psychological effect of the loss of control and authority may create social and esteem problems arising from identifying too closely with the position.

In summary, survival as academic department chair involves overcoming obstacles such as role conflict and the difficult task of maintaining healthy relationships with faculty. Both of these, along with several other job related factors, commonly cause significant levels of stress. However, adaptation to and management of the stress are possible. One has survived as department chair when one is able to leave the office and successfully reintegrate into the department without major personal or professional trauma. If one returns to a better department than previously existed, then the ordeal has been worthwhile and, perhaps, even rewarding.

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