THE ASSOCIATION FOR COMMUNICATION ADMINISTRATION

JOURNAL OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR COMMUNICATION ADMINISTRATION
2024, Volume 41, 17–26

Effective Communication for Department Chairs: Thinking Like a Leader, Acting as a Colleague

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ABSTRACT
This is the third essay in a three-part series that the author has been working on. The first and second parts appear in earlier volumes of the Journal of the Association for Communication Administration.

KEYWORDS: leader, chair, communication

Introduction

Despite the critical role that department chairs play in academia, there have been relatively few publications about what a chair needs to do and what a chair does not need to do in regard to communication. Our discipline has much to offer those who want to be chairs of communication departments and academic departments in general. The principles that we engage in through interpersonal communication, group communication, and organizational communication apply to chairs in most academic departments. We need to suggest ways to communicate that are practical as well as theoretical.

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Books on departmental chairmanship have been popular over the years. Since many of these were popular in the 80s–90s, various changes have taken place, including: renewed interest in use of electronic media and subsequent instantaneous access to others around the world (Hickson & Stacks, 1992). There has been reduced financial support for higher education from federal and state governments. Grant monies from governmental and private agencies have also decreased. To compensate for these losses, tuitions have climbed at an accelerating and alarming rate. At the same time, interpersonal communication problems have continued as we search for solutions to short-term and long-range challenges in colleges and universities. The roles of leaders have multiplied.

Challenges, though, are just that. Perhaps the most important quality of a leader in today's world is adaptability, followed closely by innovation, and entrepreneurship. These qualities are all highly dependent on one's ability to communicate in a variety of contexts. Effective communication processes drive a culture where these qualities garner respect and support.

Background

Academic leaders rarely start out as leaders. Most begin by completing a doctoral degree and accepting a position as an assistant professor. From there, the pathways to leadership vary. The most typical path is to engage in high quality research and teaching, where success leads to tenure and promotion to associate professor and then to full professor. This process usually takes at least 10 years. However, those who end up in leadership roles may progress at a faster pace.

Professors are certainly leaders. By publishing, they contribute substantially to their academic discipline and bring favor from their institutions. Many, in fact most, professors never take administrative positions. For a variety of reasons, others move into managerial positions. Their reasons for doing so are both personal and departmental. Most wish to significantly impact the growth and productivity of their units. They want to add to their institution's prestige.

The purpose here is to outline the communication characteristics and actions that provide leadership opportunities for those who wish to seek them. We begin the process by discussing what a faculty member needs to do to become a department chair.

The Academic Chair Position

One important way that academia differs from the business enterprise is that there is little training for a person to become a chair. Some faculty members do not understand the position at all. Others think they know what a chair does but soon discover that the position is quite different once they obtain it. The basis upon which a department and a dean select a chair varies. They generally begin by deciding whether to select someone from within the unit or from outside.

The individual who becomes chair from within a department where all of the other members have been colleagues for some time presents the first case. When there is consensus, there is no problem with the selection process. This may be the case when the candidate has been an assistant or associate chair for a year or two. The candidate's colleagues have some experience with how she or he functions in some administrative capacity. Quite frankly, many associate chairs are given considerable responsibility and authority while others are given little of either. Holding the position, in and of itself, is not necessarily a sign of how effective the person will be as chair. The advantage of this approach to selecting a chair is that colleagues know how the candidate acts as a faculty member. Depending upon the responsibilities the candidate has had, the faculty may also have an idea of the administrative approach of the person. Typically, this situation starts out as if everything will remain the same. The greatest difficulty here is separating one's former ties as a colleague from what is now both a colleague and a superior–subordinate relationship.

Second, when the new chair comes from another institution, he or she must learn quickly the culture of the institution, the culture of the department, and the previous power structure of the department. The learning curve is quite high for a new chair from the outside.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge is time management. As a faculty member, one typically has much control over their own time. When one becomes chair, time is usually under someone else's control. The problem of time management and the difficulty in adapting, from minute to minute, has been illustrated by Spicer and Staton (1992):

> 7:30 You arrive at the office and go to make coffee, only to find that someone left the pot plugged in all night and the machine has fried itself. [long day coming you think]
>
> 8:05 Your favorite candidate for a job you are trying to fill calls and withdraws from the position because she got an offer $15,000 better than yours. [money isn't everything, you jerk, you think]
>
> 8:15 Your administrative assistant calls in with the flu. The two of you were going to finalize next year's budget, which was due yesterday. [where are those files anyway, you think]
>
> 8:35 A student in the only class you teach this term stops by to say another student cheated on the last exam you gave. [why am I trying to teach, you think]
>
> 9:05 The dean calls and wants a summary of all faculty publications, papers, presentations, consulting, community service, professional service, dental appointments, and the names of all children. He wants this by 11:00. [ha, you think] (pp. xi–xii)

Perhaps this is an exaggerated view, but it does happen, and even worse. And remember, it is not even lunch time yet. Time becomes a precious commodity.

When I was a chair, my roles were diverse. I had to ask several people to resign. I had to go to the office at 11:00 at night because one of the faculty offices was flooding from a thunderstorm. I had to call an exterminator because there were squirrels in the toilets of the journalism lab. I had to re-start a search for a position weeks after someone had already accepted the position but reversed the decision because his spouse did not like the public school system in our town. I have served on selection committees for administrative assistants and for a dean, a vice provost, and a president. I have served on grievance committees. I have been threatened with lawsuits and physical fights although (thank goodness) neither took place. These are part of the job, and there must be others I never encountered.

The chair position is rather unique. It involves being somewhat of a white-collar factory supervisor who lives in the union hall but reports to the boardroom. The chair is always supposed to know what is going on in the department. That includes knowing the answers to these kinds of questions: (1) Why did Bob not come to the school banquet? (2) Why has Jane not published anything in the past 4 years? (3) Do you really think Bill should get a salary increase for directing the graduate program? (4) Is Melody getting married *again*? And, yes, you are right. Many of these are personal questions. Nevertheless, some deans expect the chair to know not only what *officially* is going on but also what *else* is going on.

All of these personnel issues occur at the same time that the chair is receiving emails throughout the day—from superiors, from faculty members, from other chairs, from faculty at other universities, from alumni, from students. The term, *information overload*, has been around for a long time, but it is certainly more pertinent in the workplace now than it has ever been. Part of the time management approach is knowing what information is needed, what is useful, and determining what is *spam*. In this case, spam may be more than what it is ordinarily considered. It is not atypical, for example, to get an email from some source. That same email is forwarded to the chair from the dean's office, the provost's office, the president's office, and even the faculty senate. But even person-to-person interaction can be spam, which is usually cathartic interaction from a faculty member or a student (Hickson, 2017, p. 4).

Thus, in information theory terms, there is considerable redundancy. Such redundancy occurs not only in emails. When the chair sends the faculty an agenda for the next meeting, she is likely to receive requests from some faculty members to explain what some of the items on the agenda are about *prior* to the meeting. In some other cases, information is entropic. A chair may be asked to write a report with little information about its format, purpose, or ultimate intent.

These issues are managerial issues, but they are also *communication* issues. They involve sending, analyzing, producing, de-constructing, translating, interpreting, and presenting messages. *The effective leader is an effective communicator*. I refer to human interaction here because messages may be communicative, persuasive, cathartic, or some combination. There are several general concepts, tasks, and environmental ambiences that guide such effectiveness.

General Concepts of Interaction

Here I will discuss eight general concepts of communication that are instrumental in today's academy. First, there is the matter of shared governance. *All* faculty members should be involved in the decisions that affect them. *All* frequently elicits a number of questions. Does that include non-tenure-earning faculty? Does that include adjuncts? Does that include graduate assistants? What about the administrative assistant? The answer is that *all* includes all persons who are *affected*.

Some examples may be helpful in answering these questions. If there are to be changes in the graduate curriculum, all of the faculty who teach graduate courses should be involved as well as some representative graduate students. This curriculum matter does not affect the administrative assistant, undergraduate students, or faculty members who do not teach graduate courses.

Typically, budget decisions affect everyone. If there are issues about basic courses, those instructors (including adjuncts) should be involved in the discussion.

Office space assignments should include everyone. One might find it interesting that many of the issues in departments are about what one might consider *minor* issues. Suppose the department has been moved to a new building. Ultimately, the chair must decide who moves where. What are the criteria for deciding? There are always criteria, but often the chair does not share the criteria with the department. Is it based on seniority? Rank? Administrative responsibility? Function? The chair should share both the final decision and the rationale behind the decision.

In addition to *all*, the question arises as to what constitutes involvement. Are all invited to talk but only a few have a vote? This depends on the issue of concern and what the departmental by-laws say. One of the first challenges for the new chair is to review such documents. They may be out of date. The department may have changed significantly since they were last reviewed.

All should be involved in developing and/or amending strategic plans, as well as departmental by-laws for recruitment of faculty, tenure, and promotion (Diamond, 2000). It is useful to have plans to cover 1 year, a short-term (3–5 years), and a long-term (6–10 years). There are times, too, when departments must revise plans even in the middle of their implementation. This is often the case because of resources being further restricted. They may involve increasing the faculty workload.

These issues may occasionally involve receiving new or additional resources. One day, my dean and I were summoned to the president's office immediately. As a new, somewhat paranoid chair, I began thinking about all of the mistakes I had made in the last few months. None of them seemed to call for presidential intervention. In addition, the dean did not know the topic of the meeting. The dean and I sat down. The president told us that our department was going to receive a $400,000 endowment from a national foundation. For our small department, it was as if Santa Claus had squeezed down the chimney 20 times in 1 day. Yet such a sudden influx of new money called for new decisions. When this happens, most plans need reviewing with all parties participating to make the announcement and the new decisions. "What are we going to do with the money?" is a pleasant problem to encounter.

In the context of participation, there is not only the question of who votes, if anyone does, but also how much participation there is. No person or cliques should monopolize the time.

At the same time, we need to remember that no one person monopolizes good ideas. At times, a good idea may come from an unusual place. I was once the lowest person on the totem pole at a university administrators' meeting. One person reported about the millions of scholarship dollars for incoming freshmen. Later another person indicated there were hundreds of students who were within 9 hours of graduation, but they had not enrolled in several years. From another meeting I had attended, I knew how important retention and graduation rates were. At this meeting, I asked if we could create some funding for the near-graduates. The president said that we could work with these former students as well. Almost all of the attendees to the meeting were awe-struck—either that someone could come up with this idea or that *I* would be the one who came up with it. I felt awesome for moments after the occurrence. Perhaps I was the only person who saw the connections. Of course, Dr. Loophole said, "But they may have stopped going to school for some other reason." True, but some may have stopped because of money.

As I was driving home, though, I had a realization. I was the *only* person in the room who taught an undergraduate class. There were deans, provosts, associate provosts, financial aid officers, registrar's personnel, even facilities personnel. However, there was no other person who taught undergraduate students. In most cases, none of them had taught an undergraduate course in decades, if ever.

So even those at the bottom of the ladder may have a good idea, especially if their *experience field* matches well with the content of the problem. Therefore, the second concept is: "No one has a monopoly on good ideas."

Third, for any of these ideas to take effect, there must be a collegial atmosphere where faculty members respect one another**.** When there are disagreements, they should be handled in a fair, professional, equitable, and just manner. Once such a decision is announced, all parties should understand *why* and *how* that decision was made. Such is especially the case if the decision was unpredictable. A collegial atmosphere can be achieved only when there is trust, and trust is related to predictability and reciprocity. When there are interpersonal issues at stake, they should be handled with confidentiality. All parties should agree that once that issue has concluded, it is over, at least for some time. It may be a good idea when a major decision is made also to decide when to revisit the decision.

Fourth, such a culture of trust is best to ensure high productivity and hard work. Even so, part of that trust is built upon the department members feeling that work is rewarded. Fifth, rewards should follow productivity and outcomes**.** In some cases, immediate reward may not be forthcoming because of external limitations. However, the rewards should come as soon as possible after a faculty member has completed excellent work. When funds are not available, the chair and the faculty member should discuss what other rewards might be available.

Sixth, when faculty members present potential innovations to the chair, the initial response should be positive. When the leader begins a response to a proposal with, "But . . .," it affects the innovation in a negative way. Answers beginning with "but" sound like Dr. Loophole (AKA Dr. Negative). Although there may be some kinks in a proposal eventually, the proposer needs time to complete the entire proposal before having it shot down. Because faculty members share their conversations with the chair, a negative first response can lead to a downfall in innovations throughout the department. Thus, the sixth general idea is to be positive to potential innovations in the beginning. Such factors as resource allocation, cost-benefit analysis, implementation, and mechanisms for assessing can be considered later.

Seventh, budget issues should be transparent. Some administrators feel that budgets are for their eyes only. Yet when information is provided to the department, all parties can understand how and why decisions were made. Thus, not only should the numbers be transparent, but the thought process should be also. While minor issues such as how much paper to purchase can be handled in the chair's office, a retracted summer budget should include all concerned.

Finally, faculty members know their colleagues better than anyone else. Tenure and promotion cases should follow that model. Nevertheless, it is the chair's responsibility to maintain high standards for tenure and promotion. These truly are million-dollar decisions. With these principles in mind, what kind of communication activities are important?

Interaction Tasks

Although not directly related to the general processes of communication, there are at least eight tasks that a chair must undertake. These include:

- Taking directions
- Giving directions

- Listening
- Solving problems
- Explaining decisions
- Encouraging participation
- Encouraging productivity
- Moderating conflict

The chair must learn how to *take directions* from the dean and other administrators. These directions may come in meetings of chairs and/or individual meetings. At times, too, the chair may need to learn to take directions from such people as the dean's administrative assistant. Procedures in universities change frequently, often based on changes in compliance with the federal or state government or other entities. Each university determines *how* it will comply. Budgetary models may change from time to time. If the chair pays careful attention to directions it will save a considerable amount of time.

At times the chair must *share directions* with faculty and others. It is important that deadlines for reports be firmly established. Notices of deadlines should be repeated. This is a case where redundancy is beneficial. Directions should be as clear and unambiguous as possible.

Listening may be the most fundamental skill of an academic administrator. The chair should try to eliminate all distractions when meeting with people. This means asking the administrative assistant to hold telephone calls, or for the chair to resist the temptation to use cell phones and computers while listening to others.

Many individuals enter leadership positions because they like to *solve problems*. The first step in solving them, though, is assessing whether they are really problems. Interactions with other people typically follow one of three courses. First, they communicate. A communicative message involves information exchange without an attempt to persuade. A persuasive message involves trying to motivate another to engage in a particular behavior. The third type of message is a cathartic message. Sometimes individuals just like to vent. The best response in this third case is simply to listen without feeling the need to solve a problem.

In a workshop on leadership that I conducted, one chair said that he could not get anything done because there was always someone coming in with a problem. I asked if they were always problems, and after thinking about it, he realized that many were simply cathartic messages. Although responses to cathartic messages still take time, they take less time than trying to solve a non-existent problem.

I have noticed over the years that conflict often begins not so much by what decision is made but because of the lack of understanding about *how* a decision was made. An administrator may not feel that explanations are necessary. While they may not be necessary, explaining decisions will result in greater compliance and less conflict. In addition, over a period of time, by explaining how a decision was made, the faculty members begin to understand how future decisions are likely to be made.

A chair should encourage participation in decision-making. By allowing faculty input only in minor decisions, an atmosphere of distrust ensues. Such encouragement means that the chair should even encourage input when he or she realizes that some faculty will disagree, and a few may even disagree vehemently.

Years ago, a department chair appointed a three-person committee to make a recommendation for a copy machine. The committee took several weeks working on the issue, interviewing salespersons, discussing the finances, and so forth. Then the chair made a decision that was not based on those recommendations. The committee members were furious. Although there could be a good reason for the ultimate decision, the chair never stated it, so morale was down for quite a while.

The chair should encourage productivity. Members of the departmental faculty need to believe that hard work will be rewarded. Chairs need to consider a wide variety of possible rewards. In addition to salary and rank, rewards might include being appointed to committees, not being appointed to committees, release time, summer teaching, and a variety of means of administrative assistance in research and/or teaching.

Finally, chairs need to moderate conflict. To accomplish moderating conflict as well as the other communication tasks listed above, it is important to begin by having an atmosphere where members of the department feel that openness and sensitivity to people as well as issues prevails. Here we call this environmental ambience.

Environmental Ambience

A number of communication scholars have discussed organizational culture as an essential component to the effectiveness of working groups (Gappa et al., 2007; Gillespie & Robertson, 2010; Lucas, 2000; Rosen, 2014). Here I will refer to *environmental ambience*, which is similar to organizational culture. Such an ambience tells us whether a department is growing and prospering or dying. Academic departments do one or the other. Even if their view is that they are remaining the same, that is unlikely.

We relate this concept to what Schein (2013) calls "humble inquiry" (p. 2). Schein's concept encompasses the leader's responsibility for helping to create and maintain a department's positive organizational culture and consequently its growth. If we consider interactions in terms of a few punctuation marks, we might consider the period, the exclamation mark, the question mark, the ellipsis, and the comma. Schein's contention is that the leader should emphasize the question mark. As anyone who has had children would know, the question mark is probably more effective than the exclamation mark. Using the question mark also is indicative of the leaders not having all of the answers.

Schein (2013) writes: "*Humble Inquiry* is the fine art of drawing someone out, of asking questions to which you do not already know the answer, of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person" (p. 2). In large measure, such an approach brings to fore a most philosophical question for the chair in the department. That question is: "What are *we* trying to do here?"

The answer to that question has become more complex in recent years with conflicts of interest between faculty and administrators (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Balderson, 1995; Bazelon, 2013; Burgan, 2006; Ginsberg, 2011). In part, this is because as rewards have always been limited for productivity, they have become even more limited. At the same time, a few are moved into administrative positions where salaries are frequently twice that of a faculty member.

The atmosphere partially created by social media and partly by the COVID-19 virus has generated additional problems in dealing with potential criticisms and conflicts. At the heart of conflict management, though, are the same factors that have always been there. This includes keeping negatives in focus without expanding them and maintaining the self-respect of the individuals concerned.

I have always believed that faculty and administrators were all on the same team. Yet there have been recent cases where the concept of shared governance has been eradicated. It is important for administrators to recognize the principles stated above, which may help narrow this gulf. Attention to potential conflicts in advance are quite helpful (Hickson & Roebuck, 2009). Even when rewards are limited, the best means remaining is to create some understanding among all of the parties concerned. Fritz (2013) calls it *professional civility*. Such civility means focusing on the communication that is legal, ethical, and appropriate (Hickson, 2017).

Conclusion

While management theories and techniques assist in the administration of budgets, class schedules, and the like, it is communication that helps maintain a healthy department where people enjoy working together. The functions mentioned in this paper form a beginning point for further discussion on what it means to be a leader. From what we have seen, it appears that a *good leader* is one who thinks like a leader (for innovation; future planning) and one who acts like a colleague by engaging fellow faculty on an everyday basis about the present and the future of the department.

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