Some Thoughts About Successful Department Heads

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September 7, 2001

The position of department head is arguably one of the toughest jobs in academia. There is limited ability to dictate that certain things be done in the department, and many of the most important decisions are made by the faculty, frequently as a committee of the whole. It is shared governance at its finest when it works well, but it is always a challenge to accommodate the broad range of ideas that characterize the typical group of faculty. And, of course, there are always limited resources at the department head’s disposal to effect change.

The position is made even more difficult because few of us who are placed in this role have any previous experience that provides an appropriate background and context for the job. Many agree to take on this responsibility out of a sense of duty to colleagues and the institution, some even unwillingly, and few intend to stay in the job for more than a few years before passing the torch and returning to a regular load of teaching, research, and other forms of service. Yet, the department head plays a tremendously important role in shaping the course of a department for many years to come, and contributes mightily to the departmental culture that evolves.

As I think about the successful and the not-so-successful department heads that I’ve observed over nearly three decades now (including reflections on what I did well and not-so-well myself), much of the end result can be attributed to communication and leadership of the heads. These two elements are, of course, intimately interwoven and difficult to break out neatly.

When I hear complaints about department heads, it is most often, "he/she doesn't consult the faculty (or staff); problems could have been avoided by communicating better with the people affected by the decision." Heads need to recognize that different faculty have different expectations about consultation; some expect the head to involve them in everyday decisions while others expect the head will not bother them about what they regard as minor issues. (That said, I believe department heads generally need to move faculty more toward the position of having trust in him/her to handle day-to-day issues, as too many of these small matters take too much faculty time away from more productive activities.) Some department heads err by trying to hoard information about things like the budget, apparently believing that this gives them more power over resource allocation when the faculty are in the dark. Personally, I’m of the opinion that it’s best to lay out the outlines of the budget for the faculty at the beginning of each academic year. Having them know, in general, what the department is up against gives them a much better sense of perspective when they come in and you have to tell them that you can only give them $500 conference travel money for the year; it also fosters the idea that all of the faculty are in the same boat together. Heads need to spend more time in faculty/staff offices than in their own, preferably with the doors open (although you have to do it sometimes, closed doors send many messages that are often wrongly interpreted). Openness also tends to breed a better sense that the head is being fair and that equity issues are a genuine concern.
Diplomacy is also critical in dealing with colleagues, and too often in short supply. Faculty tend to have thin skins, and messages hurtfully delivered can sour relationships forever. When faculty create frustration and problems for the head, the tendency too often is to fire back something that is equally unkind, and the downward spiral continues. It would be better for most heads to learn to take a deep breath and count to a hundred or leave the response to a troublesome message until the next morning—by then civility may have returned. I've seen several situations where an apologetic message from the originator appears in a few hours, which makes responding back much easier and more collegial.

I believe too many department heads don't get the proper balance between what I would distinguish as management and leadership. Too many view their role as "making the trains run on time" rather than addressing the questions of where are the trains going? and how do we build the tracks to get there? The management aspects of the department are obviously important, but there are some department heads who are not adept at taking care of the day-to-day functions that keep the unit working well. You simply can't move on to the more important strategic issues facing the department if the unit operates in a chaotic manner of crisis after crisis.

A successful department head leads by helping to mold a strategic and collective vision for the unit, something that faculty can embrace. That sense of purpose can be built around major themes that underlie curricular reform, upgrading the quality of the graduate program, key recruitment areas to build future faculty strength, improving the student learning environment, and the like. Successful department heads don't willy-nilly appoint a study group to look at these kinds of big issues without being very careful about who is leading the group and knowing where they are likely to end up. Again, this needs to be an inclusive process; a process that helps to build consensus internally is generally far better than hashing it out in open forum.

Overall, I'd say without question that faculty hiring is the most important strategic decision that departments make, and the head should never be very far from the process. Some delegate this activity to a personnel committee, charge the group, disappear, and wait for something to come back, and often end up with a badly split department. The strategic plan should provide a roadmap for future hiring, except for serendipitous opportunities, and the head should be right in the thick of the process, building consensus around a candidate rather than playing referee between factions. I'm a firm believer that a department head should never make an offer unless a candidate is supported by an overwhelming majority of the faculty. I've rarely seen any good come from a faculty member hired on a 9-8 vote.

One of the constant struggles for many heads is balancing their role as responsible leader of the department and as a member of the larger college and university administrative structure. Some heads mistakenly assume their role is to fight for their department at all costs and against all odds, thereby pitting them regularly against the dean whom they then portray as the bad guy to their departmental constituents. The other extreme is the "dean's lackey model" in which some heads view their role simply as the messenger of the administration and their job is to "get the troops in line." Both are usually doomed to failure and adversely affect the departmental culture and future prospects. This is a major reason why I believe that department head is one of
the toughest jobs in the University. Balancing these two roles is like playing the pivot, and understanding and openness in communication with both faculty and the dean are critically important.

The biggest challenge for department heads that I have witnessed over the years is what I call the "paradigm wars" and dealing with departmental academic factions. How these wars play out tends to have a hugely important and long-lasting influence on departmental culture and progress. I have seen these paradigm battles played out again and again here at Penn State and elsewhere. Usually, the "radicals" latch onto a new approach or "ism" and try to relegate everything and everyone in the traditional school to the dustbin. The old guard resists change, graduate students become pawns, and the battle lines are drawn. Then, the factions go after the department head to co-opt him or her, and if the head takes sides—most notably reflected in future hiring decisions—one group feels disenfranchised, good people start leaving, positions get more entrenched, and more time is chewed up unproductively dealing with the paradigm wars. Most of us, including the department head, are too involved in the immediacy of these academic issues, and find it difficult to step back and take a longer view. If the faculty can be encouraged to take a broader view of their discipline, they usually find that disciplinary advancement is often made up of what at the time looked like radical shifts with accompanying excesses, reaction, a (sometimes) lengthy period of rapprochement, and a meeting of the minds back toward, but not at, the middle. In short, many elements of the new become imbedded in the traditional. If most faculty looked at the development of their own discipline carefully, what they'd find is a kind of ratchet-like process that produces significant change in accepted paradigms over a decade or more—but it is difficult to step out of the heat of the battle. The job of the department head is to keep putting that perspective regularly before the faculty.

The department head really sets the tone that helps develop the departmental culture, and there is a lot of leadership by example. If the head works 60 hours a week, the other faculty are more likely to be willing to work long hours; if the head comes in at 9 and leaves at 4, it sends a message. If the head demonstrates a strong commitment to diversity, faculty, staff, and students are more likely to help push the agenda. If the head is respectful and appreciative of the staff, it is likely to be contagious. If the head demonstrates that he/she values faculty/staff time, they will be more conscious about the use of their own time. If the head is a good listener, faculty will share their concerns more easily. If the head recognizes jobs well done, celebrating success will become more of the culture of the department.

A successful head is also a good cheerleader, and part of being a good cheerleader is to continue to reinforce positive messages and to work to bring out the best in one's colleagues. The most effective department heads don't marginalize senior faculty, but try to keep them productively involved even though it may not be in past ways as the typical faculty life cycle proceeds. When faculty are engaged and feeling valued, they are far more likely to retire from their units feeling good about the department, understanding that change is necessary and inevitable, that they are not being pushed out, and that they want to continue to be involved in such things as limited teaching, fundraising, and the like. Also, there's no substitute for the head hosting faculty and spouse/partner events to which ALL faculty are invited, preferably in the head's home—even if it's not a big and luxurious place and hotdogs and hamburgers are being
served. These events, and the spouse/partner interactions as well, tend to soften the rough edges and combative natures around our interpersonal relationships in the academic setting.

Handling negative decisions is one of the toughest assignments for a department head. Nobody wants to be the bearer of bad news, especially poor promotion and tenure reviews, a below-average salary increase, or the like. Again, honesty and openness, delivered with caring and compassion, and if appropriate, suggestions for improvement, can go a long way toward mitigating some of the adverse effects of delivering bad news. Confidentiality is important. I've seen several instances in which department heads breach confidentiality, and soon the whole department knows about something they have no business knowing. Handling what I would call chronically negative and dysfunctional faculty members is also difficult. Too many heads continue to push them aside and marginalize them further without doing anything about it, thereby permitting problems to fester to the point of serious departmental disruption and gross incivility. Department heads need to know that academic freedom is not an acceptable justification for faculty and staff who fail to perform appropriately assigned duties and who demonstrate gross incivility in the workplace.

I always appreciated one of my former colleagues. We had some serious disagreements over the years when I was department head, but when we parted from his office or mine—still disagreeing—our differences stopped there and we could continue to be good colleagues and work together on the same side on other issues. But not all colleagues behave that way, and some find it too easy to personalize disagreement, take it home with them at night, and let things really fester and rot as they repeat their side of the story to spouse, dog, or anyone else who will listen.

No one among us is perfect. At times, we all make decisions that we would like to have back on Monday morning. Although it's sometimes hard, the ability to say "mia culpa, I'm sorry" is much appreciated by our colleagues. Accepting the consequences of our actions and decisions—even if at times it seems unfair—is a far better approach than playing the "blame game."

Your success as a department head will go a long way toward determining the future of the University as an academic institution and the learning and working environment that we all hoped to have when we chose this wonderful profession. We appreciate the sacrifices that you are making in your own personal teaching, research, and other service activities to take on or continue in the leadership role as a department head at Penn State. Those of us with college and University leadership responsibilities will do our best to support your efforts.