DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE: MANAGING CONFLICT

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SESSION OBJECTIVES

• To understand the role Department Chair as inherently engaged with interpersonal conflict
• To develop tolerance for managing, versus resolving, conflict
• To identify conflict management best practices
• To strategize around specific cases
What is conflict?

- Some difference that results in disagreement
- *Con + fligere*: Latin, “striking together”
- Can be verbal, physical, and/or psychological in expression
- Spans a gamut from differences of opinion on one end, to bullying and mobbing on the other
REASONS FOR CONFLICT

Histories
- Political
- Professional
- Personal

Structural Reasons
- Resources
- Reorganization
- Societal asymmetries (race, gender, age, etc.)

Personal Factors
- Different ways of seeing the world
- Performance and work ethics
- Insecurities
CONFLICT: SOME OBSERVATIONS

Conflict is an unavoidable part of the human condition
Conflict is uncomfortable for most people
Conflict can have negative consequences, especially if not managed:
  - Lost productivity
  - Compromised health
  - Lowered morale
But ... conflict is not necessarily or entirely negative:
  - May signal a need for change
  - Indicates where the important or interesting issues are located
CONFLICT RESOLUTION VS. MANAGEMENT

Conflict resolution:
Results in the elimination of conflict

Conflict management:
Results in minimizing the negative aspects (and, as possible, increasing the positive aspects) of conflict

Conflicts do not have to be fully resolved
However, conflicts should be managed so that the core business of the department can be conducted in a respectful fashion
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

There is no one “best” style

You can adapt your style to the situation and stakes

Core curriculum revision
  versus
Messy faculty office
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: BEST PRACTICES

1. Genuinely care about the people you work with
   Get to know them as whole people beyond work
   Build trust: you’ll need that in the bank

2. Clarify and articulate expectations and values
   Provides a baseline
   Helps with accountability
   Consider working with leadership to write a civility statement for the institution, your college or department
3. Know the policies and follow them
   Conducting research, staff evaluation, harassment, tenure and promotion, etc.

4. Be systematic about how you approach challenging people and situations
   Define the end game
   Identify allies
   Document carefully
   Identify next steps
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: BEST PRACTICES (CON’T)

5. Develop effective listening skills
   Be mindful, present, and attentive to non-verbal cues
   Respect silences, pauses, discomfort, and let the other person(s) talk
   Keep an open mind

6. Be willing to re-frame the challenge
   What knowledge or skills are you developing?
   What deeper issues are surfacing?
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: BEST PRACTICES (CON’T)

7. Get help
  Dean
  Fellow Chair
  Colleague at another institution
  Human Resources
  General Counsel
  Ombudsman
  Chief Diversity Officer
  BIT Team
ACTIVITY: CASE STUDIES

Focus on the Case Study assigned to your table

Discuss using the four questions on the handout to guide your conversation

1. What is this conflict primarily about?
2. Of the “best practices” we just reviewed, which are particularly important for this scenario?
3. Develop at least three strategies for managing this conflict.
4. What will happen if you don’t address this conflict?
NETWORKING LUNCH

Sit at your assigned table

Discussion:
“Seasoned” Chairs (1+ years in the role): what is the most valuable thing you’ve learned on the job?
New Chairs: What’s your most pressing question?