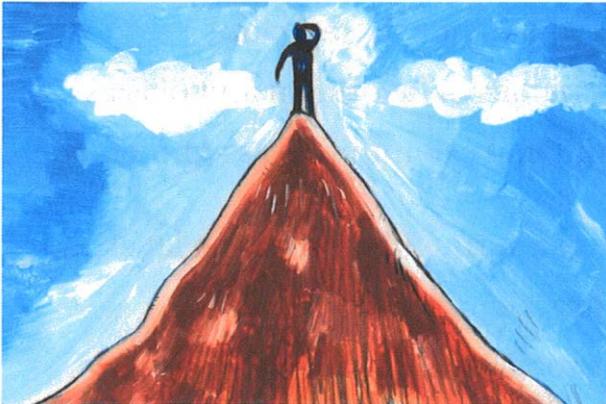


ADVICE

# What New Department Chairs Need to Know



Brian Taylor

By Rob Jenkins | OCTOBER 20, 2009

Perhaps the most difficult transition a person can make, professionally speaking, is from rank and file to management—from being one of the gang to supervising and evaluating it. That's especially true in higher education, where we place such value on collegiality, autonomy, and egalitarianism.

As a new chair, you're probably painfully aware that most of your friends are now former colleagues whom you supervise. To complicate matters, they're actually still your colleagues. *And* you supervise them. Since you're the chair, they now view you differently, as do students and other administrators. They all expect certain things from you. And there's no way you can meet all of those expectations, especially since some of them conflict.

I don't mean to be overly negative. Chairing a department is a worthwhile way to spend part of your academic career. Two-year colleges need good department chairs in order to function well—or function at all. But if you don't mind, I'll leave the cheerleading (such as it is) for the end of this column. First you need to understand what you're up against.

After observing department chairs for 25 years (some good, some not) and spending 10 years as a department head myself, here's what I've learned.

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**You need new friends.** Of course, you don't have to stop being friendly with your faculty colleagues, and you certainly don't have to stop liking them. But you do have to accept that it's no longer appropriate for you to pal around with particular individuals or groups—going to lunch, socializing outside of work, spending inordinate amounts of time chatting.

That's because those activities will very likely create animosity, distrust, and suspicion among faculty members with whom you do not share a close relationship. You will also open yourself up to charges of favoritism and bias as you complete evaluations, schedule courses, and make committee assignments.

Seek out a new group of friends from among those at roughly your same level on the organizational chart: other department chairs, department heads in nonacademic areas, and program directors. Or socialize with people who are technically below (or above) you on that chart but whose jobs are unconnected to your own, such as counselors and librarians.

The good news, of course, is that even though you are leaving some old friends behind—and may never be as close to them again, even if you return to the faculty after a few years—you stand to make some new friends. You are also forming a support group of people whose work situations are similar to yours and perhaps making connections that will benefit you throughout your career. After all, one of those other chairs might well be dean one day.

**Your default mode should be pro-faculty.** Even though you may no longer be close friends with members of your department, you now have an even greater responsibility toward them: You are essentially the fire wall between them and vindictive students, angry parents, and crusading administrators.

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When I first became chair, I thought my job was to keep faculty members, administrators, and students all happy. I quickly figured out that that was impossible. The chair's real job is to keep faculty members happy without annoying administrators and students too much.

Having just recently left the faculty ranks, your natural loyalties probably lie in that direction. But there's another reason for taking a pro-faculty stance: You're the only administrator who will. Sure, deans can be pro-faculty, to a point, but the nature of their jobs often requires them to take a wider view. I've always believed it's the chair's job to stand up for faculty members, and a chair who is unwilling to do so will not have much success.

That doesn't mean your department members will always be right (although I've found over the years that they usually are, especially in grade disputes). There may be times when you simply have to acknowledge that the faculty member is wrong and take steps to rectify a situation. But initially, at least, when everyone else on the campus is coming down on a faculty member, it's important for you to be on his or her side. That may be the single most important way to build trust in your department.

Which segues neatly into my next point.

**Trust is the key.** A friend of mine who is a basketball coach says that, in his profession, there's a continuing debate over whether it's more important for players to respect the coach or to like him. I have to admit that when I first became a department chair, I wondered about the same thing.

The answer, I soon learned, is that neither respect nor affection is the most important element in your relationship with faculty members. More important by far is that they trust you.

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Trust, in this context, means several things. It means that faculty members believe they can talk to you about anything, that you'll keep those conversations to yourself, and that you won't hold what they say in private against them. A department chair who is a backbiter or a gossip, or who simply divulges sensitive information to other faculty members, is likely to have a very short, miserable, and unsuccessful tenure. (Or to be promoted. It's a toss-up.)

Trust also means that faculty members believe you will do what you say. When you agree to something or promise something or say that you will take care of something, they must be able to take you at your word. And the only way to earn that kind of trust is, over time, to keep your word consistently and live up to your commitments—even when doing so is inconvenient.

Finally, as I mentioned already, trust means that faculty members know you have their backs. Absolutely nothing is more important to department morale than that.

**It's a desk job.** For me, one of the hardest things about becoming a department chair was giving up so much personal freedom. As a faculty member I had a set schedule—classes, office hours, committee meetings—but those things rarely consumed an entire eight-hour day. And other than that I could pretty much come and go as I pleased.

Department chairs, however, are basically chained to their desks from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., five days a week, 250 days a year, except to attend various and sundry meetings. (You know your job is tedious when you look forward to a committee meeting.)

As chair, you have a lot of paperwork: class schedules, workload reports, adjunct applications, faculty evaluations, crossword puzzles. But the truth is, whether you're actually doing anything or not, you simply need to be sitting at your desk so people can find you when they want to complain. And by people I mean

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anyone with a gripe, including but not limited to students, faculty members, counselors, custodians, book-store managers, vending-machine operators, department secretaries, public-safety officers, other department heads, and upper-level administrators.

Why?

Because you-know-what flows downhill. If you make the rookie mistake of actually looking at the organizational chart, you may subscribe to the popular misconception that, although deans and vice presidents are clearly above you, faculty members are below you. In other words, you're in the middle—hence the term "middle management."

That view is not entirely accurate. You are in the middle, but only in the sense of being between a proverbial rock and a hard place. Otherwise you are not really below deans and above faculty members, but rather below both of them. Students, too. Imagine those three groups as the sides of a triangular-shaped basin. You are the drain.

OK, I'm exaggerating, but the fact remains that administrators will blame you for what faculty members do, faculty members will blame you for what administrators do, and students will blame you for everything. The trick is to figure out which complaints are valid and which ones you can actually do something about. Then deal with those, and basically ignore the rest. With a little wisdom, a little hard work, and a lot of luck, you'll solve enough real problems that the petty or imaginary ones will fade into the background.

No doubt you're thinking that the picture I've presented of chairing a department is pretty bleak, and that maybe you've made a mistake accepting the job.

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Maybe you did, but not necessarily. As I said at the outset, being a department chair can be a tremendously rewarding experience. In fact, when it comes to making a difference in people's lives every day, you really can't beat it. Because, in the end, that's what a department chair really is: someone who makes it possible for other people to accomplish their goals—for teachers to teach, students to study, administrators to, uh, administer.

Being a department head is not easy, and it's not always fun, but somebody needs to do it. And right at this moment, maybe it's good that it's you.

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