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ADVICE

10 Suggestions for a New Department Chair

By Michael C. Munger | APRIL 08, 2010

On June 30, just three months from now, I will finish my third term as a department chair at Duke University. When people ask if I might continue, I paraphrase Chief Joseph: "I will chair no more forever." Of course, one of my law colleagues responded with a paraphrase of Chief Justice Holmes: "Three chairmanships of an imbecile are enough."

Few academics get a Ph.D. looking to go into administration, most likely because we would be terrible at it. I took a Myers-Briggs test back when I was an assistant professor, in the 1980s, and have never forgotten the result: "Dear INTJ: You are poorly suited for management." But there was a footnote: "Unless you are a university professor. You may be qualified for academic management because your colleagues are worse."

Universities are not very intentional or coherent in training administrators. Most of the rewards, and all of the prestige, go for publication and securing grants. And raises are more likely to reward those who receive outside offers, not the person who redesigned the undergraduate curriculum.

Nonetheless, the department chair's job is a crucial one. Our best hope, in a world where the position rotates, is to be able to pass on folk wisdom, to help the next generation avoid the mistakes that the old folks made. In that spirit, here are 10 things I wish I had known before I became a department head:

1. You will never have more friends than you have right now. When you first take over as chair, you should connect with members of the department you may not know well, or have considered aloof or even unfriendly. Don't make enemies by assuming they are not friends. Once you have lost a friend, it's hard to get that person back. Above all, never choose short-run gains at the cost of making enemies.

2. It's just lunch. Have lunch (or some other extended gathering) with every member of your department once a year, even with the ones who don't like you. If you want them to rise above petty dislikes, you need to do the same.

3. How can I help? Ask questions, and listen to the answers. Some of the responses will be simple kvetching, but even there your faculty will appreciate the fact that you listened. After you listen, ask, "What one thing could I do to make your work better, and your life easier?" There are lots of little problems that you as chair can fix in less than five minutes. There is a reason why successful politicians spend resources on constituency service.

4. Pay with honor. Most of us want respect from our colleagues. Giving out honors, rewards, and simple recognition has a bigger effect than it would in a more money-focused environment. Recognize book prizes, significant grants, or even interesting opinion essays written by your faculty members. Cultivate an atmosphere in which contributions to the collective good are honored, and you will get more contributions to the collective good.

5. If you take the job, do the job. If you can't make yourself do the right thing, resign. If you don't resign, do your job. That might mean firing that toxic staff person, the one who knows all the rules and constantly makes everyone miserable. Sure, firing someone can take six months of concentrated work, keeping track of things and talking to administrators. But the second biggest contribution I made to my department (faculty hiring was the first), in 10 years, was firing four toxic staff members at different times.

6. Never, ever say, "I am the chair, you know." Because they do know. You become the chair by acting like the chair. Departments that use a chair system are democracies. You cannot force through policies that faculty members oppose, and it's a mistake to try. If you are calm in the face of criticism, and run meetings fairly and transparently, you are likely to get people to vote the way you want because they want to have a leader who can get things done.

7. Think like a farmer. I grew up on an orange farm. It took six to seven years between planting young trees and harvesting fruit. At the end of each day of work, thinking about how much work was left would be depressing. That's why farmers never think that way.

Instead, look back and think how much you accomplished (and make sure you did achieve something). Structure your day, and priorities, so that you accomplish many small things and at least one large thing every day.

8. An urgent matter is not necessarily an important one. And an important one is not always urgent. Naturally, your top priority as chair is to deal with matters that are both urgent and important. Find a way to delegate issues that are neither urgent nor important to make sure they still get done. Use your discretion to delegate matters that are urgent but unimportant.

Finally, and critically, make time for tasks that are important but not urgent: Guiding junior faculty members, coordinating grants, working with the development office to explain your long-term plans for fund raising, and other executive functions are the heart of your job. Do your job, and do not get distracted by minutiae.

9. We should talk. Extinguish e-mail flame wars. Somebody has to be the grown-up; why not you? Some days I get 250 new e-mail messages. More than a few of them make me angry, and I often type an angry response. Then I delete it and write, "We should talk." This is an invitation, as well as a demonstration of authority. Few people will say in person the horrible things they say in an e-mail message. Furthermore, angry e-mails are written records of your mistakes. Don't get trapped into an angry, poorly thought-out response you will regret two minutes after you hit send.

10. Histamines. One of the problems of being a chair is that you are bombarded by messages, calls, and visitors, all of which are saying the same thing: "You must care about this matter that I care about!" The burden of having to care will build up, like histamines in your bloodstream. Histamines cause a cumulative inflammatory response, and all that caring has the same effect.

Hearing about one more parking problem or conflict in next semester's schedule may inflame you: "I don't care! I just don't care." The problem is that you have to care; that's most of the job. If you really don't care at this point, reschedule the meeting for tomorrow. If you can't reschedule, take notes and practice active listening ("Yes?" "Ah, OK." "That must have been hard for you!" "Well, I see what you mean.")

In closing, I would quote James Brady, President Reagan's press secretary, who was shot

in the Hinckley assassination attempt in 1981. Later, after a reception in which Brady was retiring as press secretary, he turned to leave. One of the members of the press yelled out, "We'll miss you!"

Brady turned back to the microphone in his wheelchair, and with a huge grin said, "I'll miss some of you!" I think every retiring chair knows that feeling.

Michael C. Munger is chair of the political science department at Duke University, a position he has occupied since 2000.

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