

## *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

# **Being a Department Chair**

### *Fifteen Tips for Success*

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Academia is a strange business. Like all businesses, it needs leaders. In the world of for-profit business, leadership is a huge topic. The same is true in most organizations, whether military or sports or whatever. Yet, unlike other organizations, people in the upper administration in universities are hardly ever really trained for their role. Unlike in business or the military, where courses in leadership are expected (even mandatory), hardly anyone in the upper administration of universities has explicitly learned about leadership and other topics unless they chose to read up on it themselves. Graduate programs in chemistry, engineering, history, or English would never have a course in leadership, and the same is true in most fields (there might be such a course in psychology or in business programs). Yet academics from all fields are needed to go on to leadership roles in universities. How does this happen?

The first step is usually by someone being selected by his or her department and by the relevant dean as a department chair, the first rung on the administrative ladder. Probably that person has served well on committees, has said wise things at faculty meetings, and is perceived as reasonable and fair. However, some chairs are selected without these qualities, either because the department and dean made a mistake or because the department or dean was desperate (no one in the department was really interested and qualified). It is a curious fact of life that many members of a department immediately hold anyone in suspicion who seems eager (or even willing) to be its chair.

That leads to the interesting question of why people want to be department chairs. When people would ask me, I had a stock phrase: "Ever since I

was a child, I have had a dream of having a job in lower middle management." That is, of course, the business-word equivalent of a department chair in academia, except that in business most people are hungry for advancement, to go to upper management. That seems much less so in academia. One friend told me "I feel as if I am stepping down from the faculty to be department chair. It's not a step up. I would rather be doing my research and teaching."

Finding the right chair is often a slow dance of a somewhat willing candidate (someone who does not immediately say no) having her or his arm twisted slightly by the department and the dean. Somehow, every academic department in every college or university must find a chair, and it is not always an easy process. But let's assume the process has moved along, and now you, dear reader, find yourself as chair.

Being chair of a department is hard work. Like being a journal editor or like being a parent, a person not in the situation can vaguely appreciate that it is hard, but you can't really know how hard and why until you have experienced it for yourself. I have been a chair once, for eight years. I was an "external hire," meaning I came into a new department from the outside. I had never previously served as chair. At the time I took the job, I had observed seven chairs of departments at three universities. I thought I knew a few things via observational learning, and I did, but the relevant word in this sentence is *few*. Many of the tasks that a chair performs are hidden from view to members of the department. One important step I took immediately was to ask a trusted colleague whom I had known for a long time (Dave Balota) to be my associate chair. He could tell me about the folkways and mores of the department and university because he had years of experience. He kept me from making many blunders.

My dean (Ed Macias, a chemist) was helpful and wonderfully supportive when I came to Washington University, but he taught me one important lesson early on. I was having some particularly vexing problem (now blissfully forgotten) in my second year as chair. I went to Dean Macias, the man who hired me, for advice. He listened to my problem and, in the course of giving advice, he said, "Remember, the hardest job in the university is being department chair. You frequently have to say no, and the people you are saying no to are your colleagues, your friends, and the people you live with and see every day. I say no a lot as dean, but I don't live with the people every day the way a chair does." I told him he didn't mention this feature of the job when he was hiring me.

Departments come in all shapes and sizes, just as universities do. One important feature is whether you are in a highly democratic department (some have written rules, bylaws, lots of committees, and vote on every-thing). Some departments have meetings every week. In this situation, the chair is often more a mediator than an inspirational leader, due to the situa-

tional constraints. Other departments, often ones where the leader is called a "head" rather than a chair, expect the head to lead without as much discussion from the department members (who like to go about their own work and not be bogged down in debates). My own department called the leader a "chair," but the system was more like a head system. The custom in my department before I arrived (and still today) was for the whole department to meet infrequently, and everyone seems to like it that way. Department meetings often produce more heat than light.

Below are my fifteen tips for department chairs. Some come from my time being chair, some come from friends, and some come from my role in working with other chairs as an associate dean for some years. Of course, as just noted, because psychology departments come in all shapes and sizes, some tips will not apply in all cases.

1. *Have a vision.* One of the first jobs of the chair is to create a vision for what he or she wants to accomplish and a realistic plan to move ahead. That plan should include how to bring people along with you, not to dictate to them. I came into a department of fifteen members with a brand new building (half empty when I was hired), and the vision of the whole department was to move ahead with hiring and building. When I left the chair's office, we had thirty faculty members and had filled the building. When money is flowing and you have a chance to build, you can enjoy being chair. Of course, even under these conditions, it's not all sunshine and roses, and hiring can be quite stressful as well as rewarding. For every person you hire, you interview maybe four people, and I still remember several candidates we wanted who eluded us.

Of course, the vision for the department depends upon the type of department you are in and what resources are available. Your vision might be to improve your undergraduate program, your research profile, your graduate program (or some combination). Discuss your vision with the faculty and get their input.

2. *Start slowly: Learn your faculty and your department.* This is especially good advice—even mandatory advice—for a chair coming in from a different university, but it is good advice for "inside" chairs, too. For the latter, you have been in the department, but not as its leader. You need to understand various sides of any issue before you launch into changing it. Leaping too fast, before you know the landscape, can be a recipe for disaster. Talk to people. Listen.

3. *Be upbeat.* The members of the department look to you to set the tone, even if it is a more or less unconscious process. If you want morale to be high, you need to set an example. Even if you are having problems (or maybe even especially if you are), don't whine and complain. If a chair portrays continual gloom and misery in being chair, the department will pick this up. Emphasize the positive when you can; keep your mouth shut most of the time

when you can't. Keep in mind you want to get someone good to be chair after you are done. If you make the job sound totally unappealing, that will be a tough sell. Don't overdo positivity when it is unwarranted, of course, but if it is possible to portray a glass as half full, do it.

4. *Be organized.* This one sounds like a no-brainer, but you would be surprised. If your personal style has been to be kind of scattered and to let others remind you of duties and deadlines, you need to change. You need to control your own schedule and make the most of your time. You cannot afford to let matters slip when other people's fortunes and careers are riding on your performance.

5. *Build a calendar of events.* The academic year has a rhythm. The first year as chair everything is new, but after that you face the same tasks and the same deadlines every year. Get prepared. Put them on your calendar and put in reminders for the weeks leading up to them. In my university's system, we need to send out letters for tenure and promotion in the summer to have them in by the fall; we need to prepare budget documents in the fall for a meeting with the dean and the dean's budget officer in December; we need to evaluate performance of junior professors in February so we can get a letter to them by mid-March. And so on. The calendar of events (which the prior chair can help you with) is critical to good organization.

6. *Develop an effective staff and treat them well.* Nearly every department in which I have served has had a few effective staff members who kept the place on track. Depending on the size of the department, the chair may have an assistant, a budget officer for personnel, a grants person, and assistants for other purposes (undergraduate studies, graduate studies, the clinical program). Your assistant is critical. The cooperation and attitude of the staff and how they interact with you and faculty helps to determine how well the department runs. Consult the staff, respect them and value them, from the maintenance crew on up. They often know more about what is going on in the department than the faculty.

7. *Get along with the dean.* The former chair of a major department recently told me that his biggest surprise in becoming chair was how important his relationship with his dean was. In hindsight, he said, this should have been obvious—but prospectively he had overlooked it. In most university systems, department chairs can get little done without the support of the dean. You need to work on that relationship, even if (or maybe especially if) you find it painful. If you get in a big fight with the dean (or lose her trust), your department will suffer and you will have more sleepless nights than would be good for your health. Remember, in most systems, the chair serves at the pleasure of the dean, and the dean has the right to replace the chair.

8. *Cultivate relationships with other chairs.* Yes, in a way they are your rivals. It is your job (and their job) to get more than your (their) fair share of the budget. But you need allies and confidantes. I was fortunate, in coming in

as an outside chair, that several current chairs in other departments took me under their wings and instructed me on various items I should know.

9. *Learn the critical phrase: I'll get back to you on that.* A faculty member (Y) comes flying into your office in an uproar: "You won't believe what X has done now. You have to do something." The faculty member and X may have a long history of this kind of thing. First, calm Y down. Second, say you will investigate and learn about the situation and get back to X. Say you are busy and it might take a couple of days. Often Y will calm down, and it will blow over, but of course you do need to investigate (with X and with neutral parties, preferably those who witnessed the event in question). Then, of course, do get back to Y with your thoughts on the matter. Maybe some corrective action does need to be taken. However, many academic flaps can be ameliorated with the passing of time and some discussion. (Remember Sayre's Third Law of Politics: "Academic politics are so bitter because the stakes are so small.")

The point is: never act on an important issue after hearing only one side of a story. There are always two sides. This rule is frequently violated, in my experience as an associate dean in mediating disputes.

Just because someone wants you to take some immediate action does not mean you need to do it. Be deliberate—but do get the issue resolved within a short timeframe whenever possible. Saying "I'll get back to you" means you should.

10. *Walk around.* Don't just sit in your office, waiting for news and issues to come to you. Wander around the department several times a week. Stop and chat here and there. Talk to students and staff. Find out what's going on. Attend some of the area brown bag lunches and talks in your department, even if they are outside your academic area of interest. Try to keep up with what is happening in the various areas of the field that are represented in your department, too. Take an interest.

11. *Set an example.* Let's say you need to encourage your faculty in certain behaviors—attending colloquia outside their areas, teaching enthusiastically, being around the department and not hiding at home, spending time with students, and so on. Well, make it a point (as much as you can) to follow these same rules. Don't say "I'm too busy to teach and attend colloquia." Maybe your teaching will be light, but don't make a habit of not following the practices you expect of others. Everyone is busy.

12. *Say no nicely.* You wind up having to say no a lot, because people ask for favors ("But it's me! I'm different!"), or they ask for money for some special (or not so special) purpose. And so on. And often it is the same few faculty who make repeated requests. (A rough estimate among chairs is that 10 percent of the faculty consume 80 percent of your time.) Of course, you want to do what you can to support good ideas and move the faculty members, their careers, and your department forward, but your budget will not

permit you to do everything. And policies of fairness and equity should prevent you from cutting special deals for some faculty over equally worthy faculty. Still, even when I had to say no, I tried to do it in a way that was not dismissive of faculty members' concerns. I found that often they had ideas I wished I could support if we had the funds.

13. *Repair relationships.* It is very hard to be chair without annoying people. Some decisions you make will favor one party lobbying for something over another party. The slighted party may feel angry and hurt that you did not support his or her side. There is really nothing you can do about this situation beforehand or during the moment—reasonable people simply disagree (and not everyone is reasonable). However, after a few days, you should try to repair your relationship with the slighted party, if you can. I would typically wait a few days (tempers cool) and then ask to meet with the faculty member in his or her office to talk about the situation, to say that I value the person's opinion but that I simply disagree in this instance. You may not always succeed in repairing a relationship, but just the effort may help to bring the two of you closer over time.

14. *Remember George Burns's advice.* Burns was an American comedian who lived to be one hundred and was noted for many things, including the following aphorism: "The secret of success is sincerity. Once you can fake that you've got it made." When you are chair, some situations you face are just too boring or depressing for words. You have the same pathetic meeting with the same people over the same issues that will never be settled, in your lifetime, to the satisfaction of everyone involved. You can attend the meeting and sit with your arms folded and your bored, frowny face on, or you can just embrace the moment and pitch into the hopeless situation. Why not? Try to enjoy it. This advice is even more critical for the upper administration than for chairs. Think of all those fundraising dinners.

15. *Know when to say "time's up" for being chair.* This last tip is critical; don't overstay your welcome. Departments differ in their practices on terms for chairs. The three-year rotation is popular in some places, but for me that seems too short. At about the time you know what you are doing you are finished. For someone who maintains his or her enthusiasm, six years or more may work. But if you feel your attention and enthusiasm fading, it's time to move on and let someone else take over.

## CONCLUSION

Being a department chair can be extremely rewarding. Most former chairs tell me they are glad they did it, although one does occasionally hear "I learned some things about my colleagues that I wish I didn't know." (Another tip is keeping your mouth shut and not spreading gossip.) Yet some

people like being chair so much they seek further experience in administration, going on to be dean, provost, and president. I applaud these decisions because we need strong leaders in academia. Other people learn while being chair (and in my case in being an associate dean) that they really want to stay with their profession, with the reason they went into academia in the first place—research and teaching in their field. Still, I was glad for my experience as a department chair and enjoyed it most of the time. Good luck with your experience.

## NOTE

This chapter is adapted from a column that first appeared in the *APS Observer*. Dave Balota and John Wixted provided sage comments on an earlier draft of this column.