PROVOST’S NEW CHAIRS/HEADS TRAINING

1-15-2009
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I would assume that most or all in this group did not go into the academic setting to manage other people’s relationships with the institution and with each other. Nonetheless it would be my opinion that in most circumstances your greatest leadership contribution will come from encouraging harmony and teamwork and addressing related obstacles.

To this end I would see such efforts coming from four directions:
1) hiring,
2) addressing incivility,
3) managing conflict, and
4) setting a personal example.

HIRING (the prevention model):
“The most important thing I do is hire faculty”.

Character as a moderator or intermediate variable has profound implications. Character is a trait whose presence should be established from within an applicant pool. It should not be assumed that it can be acquired. If it has not been demonstrated before the hire do not assume it will be present after the hire.

Character is not something that should be determined during a job interview. It should be assessed by behavior history. If ever there were an example of “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” it is with faculty hiring. Never ignore character. If in doubt, pause. A genius with destructive character will be more trouble than he/she is worth.

The biggest headaches can come from lack of due diligence, or hiring a questionable candidate, based on needs of expediency. Huge mistake. Again, the most important job is faculty hiring.

When to get outside help?
No outside help should be needed for good hiring practices. I would suggest that selection committees do background checks asking about interpersonal qualities in ways that will not produce a social desirability bias on the part of the reference person. From references I ask for comparative ratings versus absolute ratings. “Comparing this person against those who would be considered the applicant’s peers, at what percentile would you place the applicant in regard to . . .

One would want to be inquiring about temperament (quality of emotional expression), collaborative style, civility, and colleagueship in general. I’m not suggesting a popularity contest. I’m suggesting use of a cut off to prevent the hiring of people who will likely cause discord.
ADDRESSING UNCIVIL BEHAVIOR:
Even with those among us who seem reasonably well-socialized, we are all influenced by group expectations and standards. For most of us we are willing to let the quality of our behavior rise to the level required by those around us – like our spouses and partners. There are informal social controls and more formal social controls. Leaders – like you – play a key role in establishing and maintaining standards of civility.

The DSM, the psychiatric diagnostic manual, has 700 plus pages describing diagnoses. Forty five (45) pages are devoted to personality disorders. Five of those are conditions where the maladjustments are largely externalized onto others. Those five conditions are covered in only 20 pages but the social problems they cause are highly disproportionate to their relative number of pages.

It has been my observation that Narcissism is the most destructive behavior pattern in academe and for largely three reasons: 1) Faculty can operate with autonomy and limited accountability, 2) Narcissists see nothing wrong with their exploitive and sometimes abusive behavior – in fact they feel entitled to it because they feel superior and not subject to the same rules others are expected to abide by, and 3) the attitude is persistent – it never goes away in contrast to other conditions that may at least come and go/wax and wane.

The visceral expectation placed on leaders, in the animal or human world, is they allow the rest of us to feel safe and secure. The belief is that the leader will keep things under control and protect us. If a faculty member is allowed to dominate, intimidate, and humiliate, the message goes out a) that you are on your own to stay safe and b) that rules of engagement don’t exist. When belligerence is tolerated, those who are precariously socialized may see justification in being more aggressive.

The socialized types now find the collective faculty experience aversive and start to avoid spending time in the department. With no cohesive counterforce there is more acquiescence to domineering and hostile behavior. As a collegial body the department is becoming dysfunctional not only for the faculty but also for the graduate students and perhaps the office staff.

At this point the socialized individuals of the department have lost confidence that the leader will step forward and act effectively to correct breaches of civility. They have now lost confidence in the leadership and lost respect for the leader. This doomsday-like scenario may sound like hyperbole but sometimes it is quite real.

So the message is this, the leader needs to be ready to step forward if there are breaches in civility, address the problem one-on-one with the source of the hostility, re-direct the poor behavior, and be resolute in stopping it. The justification for the intervention could be presented as, “The department cannot function well in a hostile environment. It is my responsibility as chair/head to see that we do not have such a climate.” In discussion with the troublemaker, try to identify and describe a pattern of what has been observed, e.g. escalating explosive verbal conduct that intimidates and is taken as abusive. Based on the
personality of the offender, sometimes – as a face saving gesture – the message can be combined with an acknowledgement of that person’s good intentions but poor implementation. With other personalities the message needs to be blunt. Make sure the troublemaker hears that directives must be followed and, if appropriate to the situation, that a sanction will be applied.

Possible sanctions can include loss of assigned (versus earned) titles, responsibilities (including supervision of students), access to some campus locations, access to some employees, committee assignments, and professional development support. There could be a permanent loss of salary related to loss of special assigned responsibilities and temporary loss of salary based on unpaid suspension from work. Any such actions should be taken in consultation with the unit’s Human Resources representative.

If the abusive behavior could be construed as threatening, the troublemaker can be interviewed by University Police. This tends to have a sobering effect even on the most self-confident.

Most troublemakers have never been confronted or even told their conduct is offensive and resented.

The longer the behavior has persisted the longer it will take to stop it.

We are talking about a hands-on response on the part of the leader. Your department people will thank you for it.

Could such actions on the part of a chair/head be seen as making a mountain out of a mole hole or interfering with free expression? Perhaps, but the important thing is not letting a standard for civility erode. It takes less effort and discomfort to protect a standard than to re-establish it.

**When to get outside help?**
We typically want to be able to predict behavior – if I interact with this particular person in this particular way what should I expect? Will things get better or worse? I’m happy to assess with administrators which strategies would seem to be best.

It can be important to mobilize and empower good citizen faculty and faculty who have been mistreated, marginalized, and distressed by aggressive colleagues. I am happy to help orchestrate this.

**MANAGING CONFLICT:**
Most of us do not enjoy conflict (some people actually do), many of us prefer to avoid it, and some will try to ignore the conflicts of others. As chair/head, ignoring the conflict of others is not good. It is better to address conflict early-on, before it becomes entrenched and before it has negative effects on others.
Sometimes there is a “communication problem.” “Communication problem” is one of the great euphemisms. “I hate you” or “I’m going to destroy your career” do not represent communication problems. Actual miscommunication can be identified and corrected by the administrator. Negative or hostile intent should be recognized for what it is.

Usually, more so than with uncivil behavior, conflict management can enlist problem solving and will sometimes be appreciated by those from both sides. When there cannot be agreement, more structure can be provided that can include an imposed settlement.

Lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities is the most common foundation for conflict. An important job of leadership is to provide clarity, preferably before conflict and, if necessary, after.

**When to get outside help?**
Mediation (use of an intermediary) can be employed. It has limitations in the sense that a participant should typically not be a supervisor of another. If medication is attempted in such a case it should be made clear that the supervisor has authority to direct the supervisee. Also, mediation should imply voluntary participation. I see chairs/heads as being in a good position to mediate and in the process offer realities, impetus for compromise, and encouragement to find a settlement.

Outside help can be enlisted when an “authoritative” outside assessment would bring needed weight to establish the cause of interpersonal difficulties and justify actions to be taken. I refer to such activities as climate assessments and they typically involve interviewing all members of a group. I then report back to the administrator with findings, analyses, and recommendations.

Sometimes a threat assessment is indicated to determine if measures should be taken to protect physical safety. I obviously give them priority.

**SETTING A PERSONAL EXAMPLE**
Appear positive, enthusiastic, and fair.

Stay within your administrator role so that when you have to make personnel decisions you can do so with objectivity and the appearance of objectivity. You can provide work related advice but personal advice should probably be provided by someone else – perhaps a counselor.

Grousing, cynicism, and negative attitudes, if left to hang out there, can really bring a climate down. As chair you have the opportunity to promote a positive tone and climate for the department. Its importance should not be underestimated.

**When to get outside help?**
Should not be needed.
ADJECTIVES ONE WOULD HOPE NOT TO HEAR
Pretentious, Domineering, Intimidating, Abusive, Bullying

Most problematic are intentional troublemakers who derive satisfaction from their intimidating presence, hostile manipulation, and ultimately their acquisition of control over others. We are talking about hard wired aggressive, self-centered personalities. These are actively destructive people. Achievement motivation run amok. When these persons are challenged and exposed, it is not unusual for them to claim they are being victimized, to file false grievances, and to file false charges. Irritating people can put themselves in situations where they claim to be the “victim”.

Many believe that troublemakers drive off good people. My observations from consultations and faculty exit interviews support this.

In my experience, the flight of good people and the strategy of abusers to prevent the hiring of those who would weaken the troublemaker’s influence by eclipsing the troublemaker’s scholarship – these two circumstances represent the greatest cost to the institution from the aggressive, domineering behavior. Thomas Kuhn in his landmark book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* submitted that normal science is predicated on the assumption that the scientific community knows what the world is like and that this assumption is strongly defended. Therefore novel ideas are often suppressed as subversive. We can draw from this what many of us have observed – senior faculty can aggressively inhibit the new ideas of junior faculty.

Highly represented psychological categories for troublemakers would include: Bipolar Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and – from the personality disorders – Obsessive Compulsive, Paranoid, Borderline, Antisocial, and aggressive Narcissistic.

Like domestic abusers behavior of some troublemakers can cycle through abuse/punishment and praise/reward. This can be more than unpleasant to contend with, it can leave people feeling neurotic, distracted, and exhausted.

Generally, hostility is more damaging in the sciences because junior faculty are more reliant on collaboration.

Why do troublemakers persist? Because they get what they want. They are accommodated, allowed to shirk their community responsibilities, and consciously or subliminally given better performance reviews than deserved. In these circumstances they have successfully shaped the environment to their advantage. Behaviors are reinforced which means their frequency should be expected to increase.

What Can Leaders Do?
First, with any luck you will be facing a no or low incidence of these kind of challenges. The bad news is these low incidence problems are usually high severity problems. Low incidence – high severity. This is what grabs our attention when we are concerned about violence.
If a faculty member is going to cause problems for a recruit, the department should make sure the new person can work around the troublemaker. A plan should be agreed upon before the new member arrives on campus.

You can have a troublemaker report directly to a dean with departmental relationships (as necessary) suspended.

They can be relocated to another building.

If they overreach and create a breaking point, this is the time for good citizen faculty to mobilize, expose, and take the power away. The troublemaker, however, will often try to re-emerge by influencing vulnerable faculty to be allies unless the good citizen faculty adequately mentor and protect the vulnerable faculty.

What Advice Can Be Given to Those Who Are Mistreated?
Each case needs to be decided individually based on circumstances and based on the psychological strengths and weaknesses of the target. Sometimes fighting back is the right choice, sometimes avoiding, and sometimes leaving.

Fleeing can be bad for the organization. Fighting back can be bad for the target.

Avoiding the troublemaker is not recommended. Absence of interaction can harden the troublemaker’s arrogant beliefs and prevent the possibility of normalizing social interaction.

It is possible to defuse a troublemaker’s intent by a recognition gesture such as asking him/her to give a guest lecture. But the target person or potential target needs to avoid being pulled into the troublemaker’s orbit of influence.

For this reason it would not be a good idea for the target to ask career advice from the troublemaker. This would encourage the troublemaker to feel he/she should be able to use the new faculty member as a political ally.

It would not be a good idea to attempt to become friendly with the troublemaker by sharing personal information. Personal information can be turned into gossip and used against the new faculty member.

It may not be a good idea for the target to discuss his/her emerging research with the troublemaker. The troublemaker, for various reasons, could begin to disparage the efforts with influential persons in the field including those who sit on journal review boards.

The target of the troublemaker’s harassment should always take the high road. One reason being, the greater the magnanimity on the part of the target the less credibility there will be for the troublemaker. The target should be publicly gracious toward the troublemaker.
Work-Life balance provides a protective factor. If one’s career is everything and the only thing, setbacks or reversal of career fortune can be that much more distressing.

There are ethical issues regarding disclosure during recruitment about actively destructive people in the department. Some recruiting departments attempt to hide troublemaking faculty from recruits. Is this fair to the recruit?