Dean’s Role in Enhancing Chair Management of Conflict

University of Missouri – Kansas City

Kansas City, Missouri

November 11, 2011

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Strategies for Managing Role-Based Conflict

Approach role-based conflict with a visible understanding of the chair’s perspective and role responsibilities

Establish and maintain professional credibility with chairs

Make certain the larger context is clear

Explicitly articulate shared objectives

Consider both short-term and long-term needs and strategies

Be transparent in demonstrating the complexity of your role and responsibilities

Anticipate problems from the chair’s perspective

Use language that is meaningful to the chair

Practice talking through disagreements
**Strategies for Enhancing Chair effectiveness in managing conflict**

Engage in pre-emptive coaching

Debrief events

Host case study conversations

Assign a mentor – might be on a specific task

Use campus expertise

**Professional Conferences**
- Department Chair Seminars conducted by the Idea Center
  - Held November in Austin & June in Chicago
  - For more information, go to the following web site:

- Academic Chairpersons Conference hosted by Kansas State University
  - Held February in Orlando
  - For more information, go to the following web site:
    [http://www.dce.k-state.edu/conf/academicchairpersons/29th/](http://www.dce.k-state.edu/conf/academicchairpersons/29th/)
Managing Conflict and Especially Difficult Personalities

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Session Notes

Facts about Conflict

1. Conflict is inevitable.

2. Conflict can be constructive.

3. Conflict can be managed.

4. Conflict resolution is not always the goal.

Leadership objective: maximize constructive conflict and minimize destructive conflict.

Effective Leadership Communication

Consider doing what seems counterintuitive.

Consider both first- and third-person perspectives.
General Leadership Communication Strategies
For Working with Difficult Personalities

Establish a Culture that Curtails Difficult Behavior

- Promote a shared vision
- Make expectations clear
- Make the context clear
- Practice open communication
- Practice one-to-many communication
- Defuse sensitive issues

Managing the Immediate Situation

- Discern motivation
- Separate fact from fiction
- View issue and situation from difficult person's perspective
- Reduce unnecessary defensiveness
  - Stay on the issue
  - Language use
  - Timing
- Look for win-win

Credibility and Leadership Communication

Components of Leadership Credibility

- Perception of leader’s knowledge and ability to lead
- Perception of leader’s character and intentions
- Perception of leader’s trustworthiness

Important Facts about Leadership Credibility

- Leadership credibility is an assigned attribute
- Leadership credibility takes time to build, but can be lost quickly

To Enhance Leadership Credibility

- Make leadership communication more transparent
  - Think and reason out loud
  - Share data and decision making criteria
  - Employ one-to-many communication
- Demonstrate consideration for all relevant perspectives
- Demonstrate equitable treatment of others
- Live in the sunshine

Leadership Communication Strategies
For Managing Especially DifficultPersonalities

For Managing Personal Agendas

• Create a shared vision

• Establish and sustain processes that support the shared vision

• Discern misguided motives

• Consider the immediate and long-range context

For Containing the Pot Stirrer/Troublemaker

• Practice open communication

• Practice one-to-many communication

• Make the context clear

• Anticipate pot-stirring activity

For Working with the Prima Donna/Drama Queen

• Stay on the issue

• Time your intervention well

• Play to the audience

• Assess underlying motives and statements of fact

Leadership Communication Strategies
For Managing Especially Difficult Personalities

For Managing the Confrontation Junkie

- Resist taking the bait
- Defuse sensitive issues
- Build a firewall
- Structure the process

For Engaging the Passive and Indifferent Soul

- Assess the motivation for indifference
- Make expectations clear
- Be transparent.
- Value participation

Ground Rules For Airing Disagreements

- Abusive language will not be tolerated.

- Derogatory comments that represent personal attacks will not be tolerated.

- Difference of opinion will be discussed and everyone will be heard.

- Individuals can express their views without interruption or fear of retaliation.

- Unsubstantiated assertions will not influence the vote or outcome.

- Issues and not personalities are subject to debate.

- Tears or emotional outbursts do not derail discussion of substantive issues.

- Department issues will be discussed and decided at department meetings, and not any subgroup of faculty.

Higgerson’s Personal List of Things to Consider in Managing Conflict

Intrapersonal Conflict – Know Yourself

- Preferred communication medium (e.g., oral or written)
- Preferred communication context (e.g., one-to-one or one-to-many)
- Personal comfort discussing thorny issues (e.g., confront or avoid)
- Personal skill/experience in framing communication about thorny issues (e.g., strategies that depersonalize issues and satisfy role responsibilities)
- Personal leadership credibility with others

Interpersonal Conflict – Know Others

- Identify difficult personality types (e.g., confrontation junkie, passive or indifferent soul, pot stirrer, prima donna/drama queen-or prince, and personal agenda seeker)
- Use the first-person participant and third-person observer roles simultaneously
- Determine the best communication medium (e.g., one-to-one or one-to-many)
- Assess the issue as others perceive it
- Assess the context of the conflict issue as others perceive it
- Consider doing what may seem counterintuitive (e.g., talk with the person who your decision will disappoint)

Institutional Conflict – Know the Institution

- Assess the campus culture (especially relevant if hired from the outside)
- Know the “operational” institutional mission which may be different form the printed one
- Know institutional priorities and the external conditions that influence them
- Know institutional policy
- Learn campus precedent (e.g., when and why are policy exceptions granted)
- Identify and cultivate campus allies (e.g., other departments that need the service courses taught in your department)

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Case Study: The Invisible Tenured Full Professor

Dr. Ford is a tenured full professor who teaches his courses but does little else in the department or at the institution. The institutional policy on faculty workload prescribes full-time teaching loads and states that faculty are also expected to engage in academic advising, scholarship, and service.

As a new department chair, hired from outside the institution, you are struck by how inequitable the faculty workloads are within your department. Aside from fulfilling comparable teaching loads, there is tremendous variation among individual faculty efforts in academic advising, scholarship, and service to the department and the institution. Dr. Ford, for example, avoids all work beyond teaching while other faculty members invest significant time and talent in multiple ways. Some faculty are active in shared governance while others serve as the academic advisor to a large number of students. Still others are productive scholars. Dr. Ford typically arrives a few minutes before class, requests to teach back-to-back classes, and is out the door shortly after his last class of the day.

Dr. Ford is cordial with you and other colleagues, but spends most of his time on campus in class or working in his office behind a closed door. You have noticed that Dr. Ford’s office door remains shut through posted office hours. Dr. Ford is rarely seen talking with students outside of class. Dr. Ford does not attend department or campus meetings or social gatherings. He serves on no committees and is, for all practical purposes, invisible on the campus.

You talked with Dr. Ford when he missed the first department meeting that you called since being named chair. His nonchalance about “always” missing “pointless meetings” was disarming, but you made it clear that you expect all faculty to attend department meetings. Since then, Dr. Ford attends department meetings, but never contributes to the discussion and openly grades papers throughout the meeting. Moreover, he does not hide his annoyance for being required to attend department meetings which causes his presence to distract from department discussion.
Case Study: Managing the Confrontation Junkie

For months, the department has been engaged in curriculum review and revision. Informal conversation about today’s students and how they learn best evolved into serious discussion about how the department curriculum might be revised to better educate today’s students.

As chair, you have been impressed with the creative way in which the department faculty are working to find solutions to pressing pedagogical issues. Convinced that deeper learning occurs when students are able to observe and apply the concepts studied to a real world context, the faculty seek to incorporate experiential learning components through the curriculum. This work has also helped to build cohesion within the department and all but one faculty member exhibits enthusiasm for the curriculum revision.

Dr. Timothy O’Connor, a tenured Professor in the department, is the one notable exception to growing enthusiasm for curricular revision that would embed experiential learning throughout the department curriculum. Dr. O’Connor is well known for his cynical and argumentative nature. He can be counted on to take the opposing view and create controversy when none should exist. This would not be a problem except that Dr. O’Connor delights in waging personal attacks with any who cross his path, and he commands a very wide birth around all that he does.

Last week, when Dr. O’Connor learned that he would only receive partial support from the department for travel to a professional conference, he sent you a scathing letter in which he accused you of devaluing his scholarship and seeking to lower the national profile of the department. Dr. O’Connor, of course, sent copies of the letter to the Provost and Dean of Graduates Studies and Research. Such missives from Dr. O’Connor are typically very lengthy and so full of unfounded accusations and conclusions that any response requires enormous time and energy.

This week, during continued department discussion of the curriculum revisions, Dr. O’Connor insulted several of his colleagues individually and collectively with statements such as “I thought even you would be able to grasp this point” and “No wonder you are still an Assistant Professor after 12 years.” Consequently, even issues on which every one (except Dr. O’Connor) agrees become the subject for contentious debate. After many months of substantive discussion, Dr. O’Connor remains steadfastly against all of the proposed changes. When asked to explain why he believes the proposed changes would not work, Dr. O’Connor typically responds with a personalized comment such as “If you are not bright enough to understand this, I am wasting my time explaining it to you.”

Somehow, despite all the delays and time lost to arguing with Dr. O’Connor, the department finalized a proposal for curriculum revision. Institutional policy requires that substantial curricular revision be endorsed by the Faculty Senate and approved by the College Dean and the Vice President for Academic Affairs. The Faculty Senate typically
reviews such proposals with an eye toward unnecessary course duplication with what is offered in other departments. The Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs will consider the probable impact of the proposed changes on enrollment (recruitment and retention), resources, and graduation rates.

The proposal is to be reviewed by the Faculty Senate at its meeting tomorrow, and the Dean and Vice President are likely to approve the proposal once it has the Faculty Senate’s endorsement. It was a long and tedious process, but you are proud of how the department faculty persevered. While no one called Dr. O’Connor to task and made him substantiate his assertions of doom and gloom, the faculty persevered in developing a proposal for curricular revision that will enhance student learning. As you contemplate whether this experience will help Dr. O’Connor understand that he cannot control the department, the phone rings.

In answering the phone, you recognize the caller as Dr. Simpson, the President of the Faculty Senate. Dr. Simpson omits the customary pleasantries and small talk. As though she were out of breath, Dr. Simpson blurts out, “We cannot take action on your curriculum proposal after receiving Dr. O’Connor’s warning.”

Chair: “What warning?”

Senate President: “Dr. O’Connor sent a letter to all of the Faculty Senators, the Dean, and the Vice President. Didn’t you get a copy?”

Chair: “No, I haven’t seen it. What does it say?”

Senate President: “I will fax a copy to you. Once you read it, I am certain that you will understand why we need to return the curriculum proposal for further study.”

Chair: “Further study? What? The Department faculty have worked on the proposal for almost a year, and Dr. O’Connor was very much a part of the process.”

Senate President: “Maybe so, but Dr. O’Connor says that more consideration should be given to the ramifications because the proposed changes would jeopardize enrollment and program accreditation.”

Chair: “Oh did he? Please understand that Dr. O’Connor is trying to kill a proposal on which he was outvoted. I hope the Senate will not be bullied by Dr. O’Connor.”

Senate President: “The Senate will not be bullied by Dr. O’Connor or anyone. Dr. O’Connor’s letter makes clear that the proposal does not have full department support. I don’t know whether he is right or wrong about the proposed changes being harmful, but it is clear that the proposal does not have full department support so it would be premature for the Senate to take action on it.”

Chair: “What? Does the Senate require proposals to have unanimous support?”
Senate President: “I am not trying to be difficult, but believe that the serious consequences raised by Dr. O’Connor should be assessed at the department level before the proposal is considered by the Faculty Senate. I am sorry,”

Chair: “So am I.”

As you hang up the phone, you hear the fax machine printing. You retrieve the following letter from the machine.

Dear Faculty Senators,

The proposal submitted by my chair for your approval is ill-conceived and harmful to the department and institution. I was unable to persuade my colleagues to do what is right and stand up to a department chair who has no regard for student welfare or instructional quality.

I am willing to be the lone voice of reason even though I fully expect that my department chair will retaliate against me. (He has already denied me travel support to present a seminal piece of research at the most prestigious conference in our discipline.)

You must send the proposal back to the department and demand that the ramifications be properly considered. To endorse the proposal would jeopardize enrollment and program accreditation.

Sincerely,
Dr. Timothy O’Connor
cc: College Dean
   Vice President for Academic Affairs

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Case Study: The Telephone Call

Rachel Berkowitz, the chair of the English department, was contemplating the morale at Middleburg, or rather the morale of the faculty of the English Department. Three months ago when the dean of the college announced that there was some likelihood of an increase in freshmen enrollment, morale among the department's faculty plummeted. A departmental program review conducted four years earlier documented that the English department was woefully understaffed. Given the budgets of the last three years, the situation had become much more acute. Full-time English faculty teach at least 12, and sometimes 15, credit hours each semester. While the institution does not have a campus-wide policy on faculty workload, Dr. Berkowitz knew from the annual reports that the course load carried by the faculty in the Department of English exceeded the college average of nine credit hours per faculty per semester.

Dr. Berkowitz was contemplating the tight fall teaching schedule in her department when she received a telephone call from the dean of the college.

"I've just been on the phone talking with Maria Herrera, the director of admissions," said the dean. "First good news I have had in days. Finally, it looks like we're going to get a break from the budget cuts we've been experiencing. She tells me that enrollment for this coming fall semester is up despite the 15 percent increase in tuition. I don't have to tell you what that means to Middleburg."

Dr. Berkowitz couldn't decide why she was the recipient of this good news, but echoed the dean's positive tone, "Wonderful. Does that mean that you'll be able to restore some of our budget?"

Chuckling slightly, the dean moved into the reason for his call, "Well we're not that far along yet and we need to see what our actual income is before we could contemplate distributing any of the increased revenue among the departments, but we'll certainly consider that. What is imperative is that we see these increased applications and admissions carried through matriculation. Maria tells me that the increase is mostly in the category of incoming freshman. Unfortunately, we don't have enough sections of English Composition to guarantee that these incoming students can take freshmen comp during their freshman year. Maria and her people are worried that when students learn this they will be inclined to matriculate at a different institution --feeling that Middleburg is overcrowded. I agree and told her to open five new sections of English Composition. I wanted to call you as soon as possible so you could work with her regarding scheduling the times for these additional sections and think through how you might want to assign faculty."

Rachel Berkowitz was immediately defensive saying, "I don't have any faculty left to assign five new sections. As you know, English faculty carry among the heaviest course loads in the college. If the faculty in English are expected to meet the research as well as teaching criteria for promotion and tenure, I'm hard pressed to increase their work-loads beyond what they already are."
"Well, I understand that you would champion the cause of your faculty," said the dean smoothly, "but the college is in a crisis situation and I need your support on this."

"The English department faculty," said the chair, "are perfectly willing to support the college during this time of budget crisis. If you'll notice in the budget cuts we have made, the faculty have been making personal sacrifices to finance their own travel, long distance telephone privileges, and clerical support in order to preserve instructional quality. I cannot, however, ask them to do something that is so detrimental to their personal and professional future at this institution."

The dean, becoming a little more firm and heated, raised his voice slightly and said, "Well, we are going to teach school. I'm not going to allow any department faculty to cost us enrollment which can provide some relief to the state budget cuts we're experiencing. I know budgeting is a complex concept and somewhat obscure, but believe me, we need these courses taught because we need these new enrollees to pay their tuition. If you can't face your faculty and explain to them that their obligation is to teach courses for this college, I will tell them."

"Well you're welcome to meet with my faculty at any time," Berkowitz recounted, "but I believe you'll find them to be a group strongly committed to quality education who have been working hard for this institution for many years."

"Good, then we shouldn't have any disagreement," said the dean. "You know, there is another way to handle this overload of incoming freshmen. I could simply tell the director of admissions to remove the cap on those sections already on the books and instead of 20 students per section, we'll put 35 in each class."

"Wouldn't that be violating the agreement the college made with the state's governing Board of Higher Education," asked Berkowitz, "when we received the state grant to improve the quality of the English Composition course at this college?"

"Look, you let me handle the state's Board of Higher Education," said the dean, beginning to lose his patience. "All I need you to do is to get your faculty in line. We will order our own priorities and I'm telling you that a priority for this college must be increasing our enrollment in order to make up some of the deficit in the state budget."

True/False Quiz:

RATING:

Own:  Group:

☐ ☐ 1. Conflict is a sign of ineffective leadership.

☐ ☐ 2. When conflict erupts, it must be resolved immediately.

☐ ☐ 3. Conflict is destructive.

☐ ☐ 4. Conflict is inevitable.

☐ ☐ 5. When conflict exists, it is likely that collegial relationships are dysfunctional.

☐ ☐ 6. Good leaders work to eliminate conflict.

☐ ☐ 7. Some conflict is necessary for effective problem solving.

☐ ☐ 8. Effective leaders do not initiate conflict.

☐ ☐ 9. Individuals without title, rank, or supervisory responsibility are powerless in managing conflict.

☐ ☐ 10. To be effective, leaders must be able to manage conflict.

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