# Learning to Lead

**"A fair amount of teaching is predicated on being the expert with the answers. A significant portion of research is independent thinking and writing. Although these behaviors lead to success as a faculty member, they can lead to failure for a department chair."**

## Tomorrow's Professor Msg.#1017 Learning to Lead

Folks:
The posting below looks at some of the important things to pay attention to
in the first three-six months as a new department chair. It is by Anne. V Massaro, project manager in the Office of Human Resources at Ohio State University. Email: massaro.11@osu.edu. The article appeared in THE DEPARTMENT CHAIR A Resource for Academic Administrators, Spring 2010, 5 DOI:10.1002/dch. For further information on how to subscribe, as well as pricing and discount information, please contact, Sandy Quade, Account Manager, John Wiley & Sons, Phone: (203) 643-8066 (203) 643-8066 (squadepe@wiley.com). Or see: [http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-DCH.html](http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-DCH.html)

Regards,

Rick Reis
reis@stanford.edu
UP NEXT: Lecture Capture: A Guide for Effective Use

Tomorrow's Academia
------------------------------- 1,736 words --------------------------

Learning to Lead

A new department chair recently emailed me in response to a "welcome" message I sent him. In that email he said, "There will be no shortage of things to learn. I just have to figure out where to start!" I believe these two statements reflect what most new chairs feel and experience-an appreciation that the learning curve will be steep, and a curiosity about what to learn first, second, and third. This particular chair was promoted from within his own department. Faculty who assume departmental leadership roles at a new university have even greater challenges.

The most profound issues faculty face when moving into the chair role include:
* Building relationships with department chairs, and the dean
* Understanding others' expectations
* Comprehending the current culture, structure, and governance mechanisms
* Learning how to get things done
* Grasping the administrative tasks associated with the role, such as scheduling and budgeting.

Given these challenges, and more, there are cognitive shifts and behavioral strategies that can help a new academic leader transition smoothly and reach a level of productivity in a fairly quick time frame. "Over night" is not the equivalent of "a fairly quick time frame." Transitioning, learning, and listening should be the primary responsibilities for the new chair's first month. With the right support mechanisms in place, and an intentional focus on learning from the start, a new chair should consider using the three-month mark as a time to begin actively leading.

## Shifting Thinking

Integrating new practices into one's daily routine is difficult; many require shifts in thinking and doing. Some may require a more passive stance than faculty are accustomed to. As noted by Danielson and Schulte (2007), new department chairs who documented their journey from faculty member tochair, "We had to learn how to listen as well as how to make ourselves heard. We needed to get the faculty and staff members involved in our decisions, and the best way to do that was to ask them for their input and listen to them before acting" (p. 79). What is described by these two new chairs is a shift from autonomous decision making to collective decision making and an emphasis on listening and asking questions, rather than telling and doing.

Intellectually, the shifts just described sound simple and based on common sense. In reality, it takes commitment and purposeful action to change behavior, especially behaviors that have become unconscious habits and that serve faculty well. A fair amount of teaching is predicated on being the expert with the answers. A significant portion of research is independent thinking and writing. Although these behaviors lead to success as a faculty member, they can lead to failure for a department chair. For anyone who has an accomplished history, it is challenging to fully understand that past actions resulting in past successes may not create successes in the future. It is imperative for new chairs to adjust from thinking and acting independently to an emphasis on involving others and focusing on the collective.

## Building Relationships

Meeting with department faculty and staff is a must for new chairs. Depending on the size of the department this task alone can be a big time commitment, but it is critically important because of the chair's responsibility to lead the department with a shared vision and to create a plan that leverages individual strengths. While faculty who are promoted from within their own departments will have a tendency to believe they know their peers and relationships are already established, the criticality of one-on-one meetings remains. A relationship as peers has been previously established. A new relationship must be invented, one characterized by mutual respect, an understanding of what motivates and drives both parties, a commitment to asking for input, and a belief that suggestions (once expressed) will be heard. In general, faculty tend to be skeptical that "administration" cares about them or wants to hear their ideas. In addition, faculty peers don't typically discuss the future direction of the department or wrestle with how individual interests add to the discipline as a whole. Reducing skepticism and inviting this kind of inquiry will lay a solid foundation for shared direction and mutual respect between the new chair and each of his or her faculty members.

When planning one-on-one meetings with faculty, a new chair might consider framing the conversation around three categories: perceptions, strengths, and priorities.Asking the following questions will communicate that the new chair cares about each individual and the department in totality:

* What is your perception of our department?
* What strengths do you bring to what we are about and the students we are here to serve?
* What are your priorities for the next year?
* What departmental priorities do you believe are most important for our advancement and academic excellence?

Meeting one on one with the dean should be another high priority for the new chair. Understanding the dean's style and preferences and obtaining information about the dean's direction for the college are reasons to make this a priority. Is the dean someone who expects to know an abundance of details, or is a high-level, big-picture perspective sufficient? What are the meetings the dean leads and what are the expectations for pre-meeting preparation? These are questions related to the dean's style. A new chair can adjust and accommodate if preferences are understood.

The dean's vision for the future of the college, and the chair's department in particular, will influence the department goals the new chair sets. In some cases the dean will have very specific expectations for the chair's department. The more explicit these expectations are, the more likely the chair can meet them. Lastly, the dean should be a source of information about the university. If major initiatives or changes are planned, it is in the new chair's best interests to learn about these early and understand how they will affect his or her department and faculty.

It has been suggested that the new chair meet with department faculty and staff as well as the dean. There may well be additional stakeholders the new chair will want to meet with in the first three to six months. Reflecting on departmental priorities and functions, the new chair should consider making a list of additional stakeholders and deliberately planning conversations with each person or group on the list over the course of six months. Wergin (2003) offers a stakeholder framework that may be helpful to new chairs as they engage in this reflection about key constituencies (see Figure 1).

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Figure 1 consists of a series of concentric circles as follows:

Center circle = Department Chair
First ring = Students, Dean, Other Departments
Second ring = Central Administrations, Alumni
Third ring = Parents, Boards
Fourth ring = Professional/Disciplinary Societies

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Understanding Culture, Structure, and Governance

There are exact and inexact ways to discern the department's current culture, structure, and governance mechanisms. Both approaches are recommended. The easiest and most tangible way to learn about how decisions are made, and by whom, is to carefully review the existing pattern of administration for the department. This document should describe the department's committee structure, faculty meetings, key processes, and communication patterns. It is as important to understand what is not written as it is to comprehend what is written. This is the imprecise, or intuitive, way of learning. For example, one department chair perceived a deep lack of trust between the faculty and the previous chair given the length, infinite detail, and depth of description in the current pattern of administration for her new department. Having this insight helped the chair gain credibility and carefully approach process changes.

Learning Administrative Tasks

Learning the administrative and technical aspects of the chair's role can occur in three ways. Many universities offer workshops and online tutorials related to budgeting, hiring, and evaluating. New chairs who take advantage of these opportunities gain new knowledge and, more importantly, learn about campus resources. If these types of structured learning opportunities are not available to new chairs, seeking out and meeting with those who are accountable for various university processes is equally valuable. A new chair might discover the person responsible for fiscal affairs, assemble a list of questions, meet with this person to express an interest in understanding fiscal matters, and acquire from his or her point of view what a new chair needs to learn. A third option for learning about the budget and other fiscal matters is to identify a seasoned peer who is highly proficient in this area. The dean will likely be able to point the new chair in the direction of a veteran chair who has mastery in a specific area.

Reflecting with a Trusted Partner

Identifying a trusted partner is highly recommended for new department chairs. This partner might be a friend, peer, mentor, or coach. This is someone with whom the new chair can share observations, challenges, mistakes, and wonderings. In conversation with this trusted partner the new chair can be vulnerable and frustrated but feel safe in genuinely expressing him or herself. This partner should be from outside the new chair's college and have no hierarchical authority over the chair. More than title or status, the qualities of this person are paramount. The new chair should seek out someone who:

* Listens for complete understanding
* Commits to keeping conversations with the chair confidential
* Offers support
* Challenges the new leader when he or she is "stuck" in one way of thinking

## Conclusion

Transitioning into the department chair role is much more than learning how to do new tasks. While the new tasks may be daunting and require fast attention, it is the building of relationships and understanding the current culture that are the real foundations for success. Securing a relationship where the chair can confidentially reflect on relationships and the circumstance leads to greater personal health and satisfaction. Getting to know the department faculty and the dean, as well as accurately assessing the current state of affairs, is worth delaying changes and postponing new directions or programs. Rushing to perform or produce results without understanding the people and the situation can damage a new academic leader beyond repair. First impressions are lasting. A new chair who asks questions, seeks input, fosters collective inquiry, and plans thoughtfully will be highly regarded and will be in a more stable leadership position for stretching the department in new ways.

## References

Danielson, L., & Schulte, L. (2007). Voices of women in the field: The top 10 things we learned about being a department chair. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership, 5*(1), 77-81.

Wergin, J. F. (2003). *Departments that work: Building and sustaining cultures of excellence in academic programs.* Bolton. MA: Anker