Dealing With the Dean

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A DEPARTMENT chair must report to someone. In the following discussion, “dean” refers to that person or office. (Also for the sake of simplicity, the institution, or unit, is termed a “college.”) Given the many different administrative structures in the more than three thousand American academic institutions, the dean may be a dean (senior or associate), vice president, provost, division head, or other administrator.

In defining the dean as the administrator to whom the chair reports, we must not forget that the relationship is symbiotic: the chair needs the dean to be an advocate for the department, and the dean needs the chair to document academic and administrative accomplishments and needs.

As department chair, if you wish to achieve the greatest possible level of support from your dean, there are five things you must do:

• instruct the dean about the nature of your discipline(s);
• convince the dean that your department is producing in all the areas that the college considers important—as well as other areas;
• keep the dean well informed about your department’s achievements and problems;
• clarify and document, in the proper forms and formats, your requests and proposals; and
• support the dean’s efforts.

In other words, you want your dean to be almost as expert in the administration of language programs as you are, and thus your ally in academic affairs and administrative matters. Earning the dean’s respect and favor is a never-ending process that requires you to think like a dean.

Tactics that prove successful in some circumstances may produce very different results in others. The following comments, suggestions, and recommendations are made with full awareness of this fact and are based on my more than twenty-three years’ experience as a department chair (at two institutions), a dean of liberal arts and of arts and sciences (three times, at two institutions), a dean (acting) of graduate studies, a dean (acting) of continuing education, a vice president (acting) for academic affairs, and a dean of an undergraduate college. In three instances, I held two positions concurrently.

After almost a quarter of a century spent reporting to, and being reported to by, a large number of other offices, I know this for sure: dealing with the dean with efficiency, with goodwill, and with the good of the organization in mind can mean the difference between the success and failure of a department—and, thus, of a chair. (It helps, too, to show attention to the good of the dean.) There are ten simple rules to observe in these dealings.

1: Know Who and What the Dean Really Is

Take this simple quiz. The dean is (check one only):

• an accountant obsessed with the bottom line;
• an academic visionary;
• a room scheduler;
• a money raiser;
• a manager with no authority;
• an errand person for the next-higher-up;
• a frustrated former professor of something;
• a power broker (or power mediator, or power luncher);
• the ultimate arbiter in disputes between faculty members or departments;
• a nitpicker over details;
• someone who can help a department to grow in ways it hopes to grow, instead of following an imposed plan.

No doubt you discovered the answer to this trick question: all the above at some time or another and none of the above at other times.

Today’s deans are in a terrible bind: funding is decreasing and costs are soaring. Presidents and boards of trustees must assiduously enforce balanced budgets (something that faculty members never have to deal with). So when deans submit their budgets for the next year, they must be absolutely certain that the figures they provide, both historical and projected, are correct—and easily understood by nonacademics (such as treasurers or board members). Thus, we come to see the dean as an accountant, a bean counter.

Deans are, of course, originally selected to provide academic vision. But their offices’ attentions soon become
dominated by the mundane; as they become more occupied with such problems as classroom and storage space, it quickly becomes apparent that they have no real authority, for example, to evict subsection X from storage room Y, which is now needed for new equipment. It is sometimes astonishing how hard it is for deans to make a difference: they often have less power than faculty members believe.

At the same time, deans have little or no time to keep up with the journals in their fields. Most of their evenings are spent awash in paperwork and reports, since much of the day is spent in hearing (and perhaps settling) arguments about how much funding this committee should get compared with that one; or why one of the college's recent graduates must be immediately considered for a position, even though the necessary affirmative action procedures haven't begun; or how to handle an appeal of a grade that might be the result of sexual harassment; or where a reception for a visiting speaker should be held; or how to get a broken window fixed. Visitors, faculty members, and chairs alike consider deans to be their personal advocates and problem solvers. And all, of course, see their own problems as the most pressing.

In other words, a dean seldom has even a quiet half hour to spend on a single train of thought without ignoring the accumulating mail and phone messages and the endless stream of visitors with and without appointments.

It is a rare month when a dean—even an experienced one—isn't faced with some issue in an area of which he or she knows practically nothing. Most deans recognize that what applies to their own disciplines (such as chemistry) may not apply to other fields (such as languages); few, however, are willing to admit that their knowledge of other fields is, at best, superficial. As chair, you can be helpful by preparing information that will save your dean time and, possibly, the embarrassment of having to admit not knowing something. Embarrassment rarely leads to goodwill. Nobody likes revealing weaknesses.

Remember, too, that the dean is the direct administrator not only for your department; but for many others; if the dean is weak in your area, your chances for strong administrative support are dramatically diminished. The corollary, almost too obvious to mention, is that if the dean understands and is strong in your area, your chances for support are greatly enhanced. In addition, recognize that other administrative offices also place great demands on the dean's concentration, time, and energy (physical and mental). For all these reasons, your job is to fill any gaps in the dean's knowledge about your programs quickly, concisely, completely, and continually. You should anticipate what information the dean will need, and have it ready; thus, when a crisis arises, decisions can be made with far better consequences for all concerned. An informed dean is your best ally.

2: Know the College's and the Dean's Missions, Goals, Objectives—and Hidden Agendas

Your department is one of many that are supposed to contribute to your institution's mission. If you don't have a copy of the mission statement available to you at every moment, get it and put it where you can find it as soon as the phone rings. (An additional copy at home might be useful.)

Furthermore, if you don't have a copy of the statement defining how your school, college, or other division is supposed to contribute to the achievement of this mission, get one. It is important that you understand every part of these documents. The topics in these statements will come up frequently, you can be certain, since most accrediting agencies now emphasize progress towards institutional goals. Of course, be sure that your department has its own statement(s) of missions, goals, and objectives that mesh with, and contribute to the achievement of, those of the president and the dean.

In addition to stated goals, each dean has a hidden agenda. This agenda may be the dean's personal interpretation of the mission statement. For example, "improvement of teaching effectiveness" is a common institutional objective; what does your dean think the phrase means? Smaller or larger classes? Languages (or writing or math or computers) across the curriculum? More (or fewer) publications? Multiculturalism—and if so, what specifically does that mean to the dean?

Hidden agendas are often composed of vague likes and dislikes, rather than definite priorities; find out what your dean wants, hates, and dreads. For example, if she or he "always hated languages," you may need to explain how teaching methods have changed from previous approaches, which drove students away instead of encouraging them to learn. Other suggestions for dealing with such vague dislikes and opinions appear in the sections below.

3: Learn to Speak and Understand the Dean's Language

Chairs and faculty members quickly learn that deans speak in strange tongues (ICLMs [Induced Course Load Matrices], FTEs [Full-Time Equivalents], and outcomes are administrationese from three different decades). As language professors, we should be the first to try to master those languages—which, as we know, are the most obvious evidence of other cultures.

Therefore, the most important of these recommendations is this: learn the "four skills" of the dean's language, so that the two of you can communicate clearly and effectively. It is a simple but valid rule: if you understand and can chat comfortably in the administration's language, you start with a distinct advantage. By corollary: if you don't understand their language, you are at a disadvantage.
Learning the dean's language means that you must understand thoroughly the administrative underpinnings of your institution: the system of accounting, the methods of counting students and faculty members, how statistics are developed and reported to state and national agencies, how to calculate funding formulas (both internal and, if a state college, external), and so forth.

Get to know the registrar, the office of institutional research, the budget director, the affirmative action officer, the comptroller, the chief accountant, and the chief student affairs officer. Ask lots of questions: most people love to show off their knowledge, and this knowledge will empower you. Make a good friend in the math or management department or take a course in statistics and quantification technique if you must, but at the very least, develop and maintain your own data collection using a spreadsheet. Most spreadsheet programs also allow you to make graphs, which are always more immediately impressive than words.

Remember, too, that the dean, once a mere professor of Some Discipline, has had to learn this new language feverishly at some point and may readily produce the vocabulary without understanding its morphology, syntax, and semantics. Using the concepts underlying the oral proficiency interview techniques, you will quickly recognize when the dean is floundering and has reached a new ceiling. Resist the urge to sneer or to run and gossip with your colleagues and instead use this opportunity, as the consummate professional that you are, to make the dean look good.

4: Know Your Numbers

Almost every college has an office of institutional research, which is supposed to record important information and analyze it in the interest of effective management. This office keeps historical records of enrollments (by head count, by FTE, by average credits per FTE, by department, by gender, by golly) and analyses galore, comparing this with that, using both longitudinal and integrative or contrastive approaches.

If your dean calls and suggests that your department's enrollments haven't kept up with something or other, you should have those numbers handy: whenever this kind of call comes, the institutional research department has just left for a two-week training seminar. And even if the IR people are available, you'll have to do a lot of frantic cramming if you don't already understand what all these reports, comments, ratios, and so forth mean.

But if you've already taken the time to gather the data, to understand the college's several reporting systems (yes, several), and to massage the data into a report that makes the department look good, you'll be able to compare your numbers with theirs—coolly, immediately, and rationally. Your expertly personalized enrollment and staffing data will, at least, appear equally definitive and may cause the numbers people to consider whether they have made a mistake.

Your goal, as you arrange and report the official numbers from five (or more) different perspectives, should be the ability to prove, with those same official numbers, at least three different positions, as any good number cruncher should be able to do. Put another way: if you don't learn to manipulate numbers to your advantage, you may find them manipulated to your disadvantage.

You must collect and update data relating to your department every semester (and be sure to retain both a hard copy and a copy on computer disk). The following items are probably the minimum; you may wish to add more, depending on your department's size:

- enrollments arranged by course level
- comparison of enrollments with year before and previous five to seven years
- workload of each instructor (courses, preparations, total enrollments)
- productivity of the department as indicated by resources allocated per student, amount of public service done, and publications (data should be collected for both the current and most recent years and averaged over the past five years)
- major budget category expenditures, such as travel, copying, and so forth
- classroom utilization and class schedules
- ratios: student to faculty; advanced versus service-level enrollments; students taught by full-time versus part-time (adjunct) faculty, and so forth. Express these ratios in both absolute figures and percentages; use whichever sounds better or worse, according to your needs (in this sort of situation, graphs really help strengthen your case)

Finally, you should have similar data for all departments in your college, so that you can make rational (and preferably advantageous) comparisons.

Not only must you develop the data and have them at your fingertips, you must have them on the tip of your tongue as well. Questions and opportunities to score points don't come only at scheduled meetings. For example, while discussing a tenure decision, a dean may ask if your department really needs another tenured member, since enrollments have not been particularly strong. If you are ready to refute this point at that very moment, with fairly precise data, you will be in a stronger position than if you had said, "Well, I think there might be some figures in institutional research's studies about this, but I don't see how you can conclude that." Or even worse, "Where did you get those figures?"
5: Never Miss a Deadline

The first draft of next spring’s schedule is due on 1 June; during that frantic first week of fall classes, the spring schedule must be finalized. Sound familiar?

Don’t blame these crazy deadlines on the dean; generally, somebody else has set them for reasons that nobody seems to know. (The explanation can be something as simple as the off-campus printer’s deadline.) Remember that the dean has equally unreasonable deadlines to meet and that any delay on your part can cause problems ranging from minor headaches to de facto tenure for someone you’ve recommended against.

Earn a reputation for completing your work on time and in proper fashion, with full detail and documentation. When the time does come that you just can’t meet a deadline, everyone will understand that the situation must be disastrous if even you can’t do it.

6: Make the Dean Look Good

A commonplace in the business world is that a staffer’s job is to make the boss look good. This maxim also applies—whether we like it or not, whether we admire the dean or not—to the chair’s function. If nothing else, it serves an enlightened self-interest.

Your dean is competing for resources with several other deans and other administrators. The dean needs a quality “product” to sell in order to get a large proportion of the institution’s resources. If the effort is unsuccessful and the proportion is small, your department’s share will be small, too.

As chair, you can make the dean look bad, intentionally or accidentally, without half trying. Some examples: don’t show up for open houses for prospective students; don’t respond promptly to letters from outside forwarded by the dean; don’t keep the dean informed of significant faculty and student accomplishments or impending problems; don’t submit your schedules, budgets, and the like on time or in the correct format or according to proper procedures.

Your dean may be ineffective and even greatly disliked by faculty members and chairs. Nonetheless, you are totally dependent on her or him for effective liaison with the rest of the administration, for budget and program development support, and for myriad other matters. Hypocrisy and sycophancy are not necessary, but it helps your department, and all others in your division, if you help the dean appear effective. If, for example, all of your dean’s departments are happily present at an event for parents of new freshmen, she or he will be seen as an effective supporter of public relations.

By the way, if you and your fellow chairs are trying to undermine or oust the dean, remember that in such situations most higher-level administrators instinctively support administrators first and faculty members only afterward. Chairs are generally considered a part of the administration (except, perhaps, when it comes to perks) and as such are expected to keep the institution moving. However, if you are out to get the dean, the administration will then consider you as “just faculty” and you may have cut yourself off from the higher levels of the administrative and funding processes just when you need them the most.

We are all aware that some deans forget, accidentally or intentionally, about agreements they have made with chairs (supplementary funds for travel to an important conference, for example). If your dean has this tendency, make sure that you record the dean’s commitments on follow-up “memos of understanding.” Wording such as “At our meeting today, you offered . . . ” normally serves the purpose. Adding “unless I hear to the contrary” just invites an immediate reversal. By clarifying in advance, you can avoid confrontations between you and the dean at the vice presidential level: such confrontations make both parties look bad.

Finally, a small suggestion to make the dean feel, if not good, remember that deans need some relief from the daily grind. Try to avoid “shop talk” in the lounge unless the dean brings it up. If you use every chance encounter for the purpose of lobbying, your dean will begin to avoid you.

7: Make the Department Look Good

Deans need things to brag about to other administrators and to magnify (or perhaps merely justify) their accomplishments in office. In administrative circles, the dean looks good because of the accomplishments of the several departments and programs in the college. If you have convinced the dean how good your department is, she or he will talk about it as “one of the best” or “the one department that always has volunteers for advising sessions—they understand the importance of students.” When the department looks good, you not only make the dean look good but also enhance your own reputation on campus.

To lay the groundwork, you must first be sure that the dean understands the special characteristics of foreign language study, the problems we face in our classes, and the accomplishments we prize. In other words, you must educate the dean. The standard scholarly approach of supplying the dean with articles, national studies, and the like will bear little fruit, since she or he probably will have neither time nor appetite for lengthy readings. You’ll need to be more pragmatic.

Make sure that the dean knows what goes on in the basic-level courses; the imperative to have constant interaction with students, so that they can learn to speak the language; the weekly assignments, tests, and quizzes that must be corrected and returned immediately; the commit-
ment of almost all language teachers to be available in the office for extra help; and the time-consuming "oral interviews" that are common even in first-semester courses. English departments have—quite properly—justified smaller first-year composition classes on the very same ground; we should do no less. Look up the studies that have been conducted on how long a single interaction with a student takes and on how teacher talk can inhibit student talk in the mid-level courses and summarize these data (or adapt them so that they are pertinent). Show some examples of the kinds of compositions we get in the fourth-semester courses and how much attention we have to give to each paper. If your faculty members use rewriting techniques, make sure the dean knows how deadly dull it can be to read the same simplistic "essay" for the second or third time, as well as how much time is involved in second and third readings and corrections.

A faculty member who has never taught a basic language class has no idea how much sheer physical energy we exert in a fifty-minute class: invite (indeed, pressure) the dean to observe a class to get a sense of our performance. (Choose the instructor carefully, of course!) Remember, too, that many of today's deans had no language study as undergraduates, thanks to the curricular "reforms" of the 1960s. If they did study a language, they probably endured the translation or pattern-drill methodology. They may not realize how dramatically the teaching of languages has changed in the past 20–25 years—about how long it takes for a new BA to complete the PhD and then reach the dean's plateau.

Once the dean has grasped what teaching the basic courses entails, she or he can begin to understand that, since third-year classes are still heavily involved in the development of language skills, large classes remain academically undesirable at that level. Now you can discuss how these courses drain many faculty members of the energy for scholarly research.

Further, the extensive effort and time we dedicate to teaching skills-level courses, equivalent to English composition, leave us few opportunities to delve into literature—our primary area of research—until our fourth-year courses. You know the specific arguments that are most relevant to your college and dean.

In other words, by making clear what your department and faculty members are trying to accomplish in the classroom, you can explain and possibly justify to the dean that some areas that she or he may consider "weak" are inherent to the discipline. (I am assuming that your faculty members and department are in general agreement in this area.)

Once you have educated the dean on your department's workings and problems, you can make the department look good by capitalizing on its successes. Your department most likely has at least some qualities that epitomize the institution's missions: one instructor may be among the best in the college; another may be one of the most respected members of your faculty governance body; still another may be active in scholarly circles; others may have strong reputations in the community. A few, of course, may have ceased being positive forces in any area. If there's enough "good" to report, though, you won't have to mention the weak links. Almost everybody has a forte or a year's highlight that deserves mention; look for it. And don't be reluctant to brag (albeit diplomatically).

The key is to emphasize those individual accomplishments in such a way that all members of the department and the department in toto receive some of the reflected glory. In this way, too, some of the petty jealousies we often see may be calmed: the prevailing attitude can become, "Hey—I'm appreciated! We are a good department, aren't we?" Fostering collective self-esteem rarely fails to pay dividends.

One simple way to begin is with the annual report, which should become your first-line propaganda piece. Typically, of course, the format is imposed by the dean (or another administrative office), leaving little room for creativity and public relations. Most often, it calls for a narrative statement of the year's accomplishments. Here, the department as a whole must be emphasized; the listings of individual publications, papers, and other accomplishments appears later, as documentation of the total effort. (It would be worth your while to learn something about the principles of public relations.)

If you've properly collected your data semester by semester and year by year, you will recognize the patterns of accomplishments. If you know what the college is trying to accomplish, you'll know which elements to emphasize (or hide), so that the dean will have significant accomplishments to report.

If the department looks good, the chair will look good. If you try to make yourself look important, the dean may wonder why the rest of the department is so uninspired under your leadership. In my experience, more administrators have failed because of overweening pride and self-aggrandizement than they have for any five other reasons combined. Consider the not-so-hidden communications in the phrases, "My department is . . ." and "I need this for my faculty . . ." compared with "The languages department is . . ." and "The languages faculty needs . . ." Your goal should be to make your department stand out, so that it appears outstanding.

8: No Surprises!; or, If You're Going over Budget . . .

If you suspect there may be a problem pending in your department (a faculty member missing classes frequently, for example), make sure the dean knows in advance. In fact, the dean may help you find the appropriate solution: recall that there are many federal and state policies regarding alcoholism, equal opportunities, disabilities, and so on. Sometimes, when money may be necessary (such
as hiring a substitute for an ill faculty member), the dean may have to look hard to find funds. Give the dean time and keep her or him informed.

And speaking of money: the worst surprise to give a dean is an overdrawn budget. If you even suspect that you might go over budget, immediately let the dean know and explain the reasons why. Your budget is a fixed portion of the overall budget; if the overall budget is overdrawn, the dean will have problems eventually. If you’re the cause of those problems and didn’t give the dean time to address the problem . . .

Be smart: give warnings!

9: Find a Way to Lose Your Temper—off Campus

The best of chairs and the best of deans can make bad decisions, can suddenly conclude the other is a down-right idiot, or can just get worn down and be on edge. At some point, you’ll be ready to scream at the dean about something. You may be in the right, but you must also remember that venting your rage could harm a good working relationship. So you need to find a sympathetic ear, a punching bag, or other outlet to blow off steam. Spouses and housemates can be expected to take only so much of this behavior as a rule, so devise alternative coping mechanisms.

One approach that rarely fails is to write a memo—and to set it aside for a few days. Just putting your rage and frustration in print, with all your direst predictions and threats, relieves much of the tension. Print it, but do not send it for several days; it may ultimately be appropriate to send a toned-down version. Generally, though, it’s most appropriate to rip it up: it has served its purpose.

Beware of electronic-mail systems: the “send” command is irrevocable. Dashing off that scathing memo can backfire.

Beware, too, of the faculty lounge “complaint session.” What you say will ultimately get back to the dean, and generally it will be slightly twisted (maybe to put you in a bad light). Punching bags and throwing snowballs at stop signs or trees (as in, “Take that, Dean X!” Pow!) are acts more safely performed in private.

Find another chair or mid-level administrator on campus, or a languages chair on another campus, with whom you can share confidences and your lowest moments. Those who work in a similar situation can best appreciate and assuage your woes. This is a good reason to participate actively in such organizations as the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages.

Finally, if something the dean has done or said (or passed on from above) really bothers you, discuss it with her or him. It is possible that one of you has misunderstood something or failed to see matters from the other’s perspective. (It is even possible that the dean’s perspective has been dictated by the vice president’s perspective.)

10: Remember to Laugh, Especially at Yourself

This business we’re in is supposed to be pleasurable. Many of us (chairs, deans, faculty members, registrars) have forgotten that the fate of the world does not hang on our daily woes and tribulations. We tend to take ourselves too seriously—individually, collectively, by committee, by department, by whatever categories we occupy. Much of what we get upset about proves rather trivial when viewed as part of the cosmic scheme. We can see it when others get angry over insignificant matters, but we generally can’t see such behavior in ourselves.

A touch of humor can make the endless stream of memos we deal with more tolerable; it can lighten the tedium for the writer as well as the reader. (It can also increase the probability that a memo will be read.) Aim most of, if not all, the humor toward yourself and life in general. When you’re secure, you can afford to be self-deprecating. But beware: in an arena where most of us take ourselves too seriously, humor must be used judiciously, lest you appear not to take your post seriously enough.

And by the way, it doesn’t hurt to admit that you might have made a mistake or that you don’t know something and will have to find out. It’s a relief when chairs let it be known that they are only human. Their deans and faculty colleagues have known it all along, anyway.

A Final Recommendation

Always consider what it must be like to be on the receiving end when you are “dealing with the dean.”

Notes

1An example from one of my deanships: We were heading for massive retrenchments, and I was trying to buy time to implement an early retirement buyout agreement. The Associate Academic Vice President for Numbers calculated the number of biology sections (lectures and labs) in such a way that two faculty members would have to be laid off on December 31 of that year. I used a little-known trick, scheduling a lab immediately after a lecture; as a result, the two units counted as only one section instead of two, thus reducing the faculty “count.” This bought the necessary time: in five weeks, three biology faculty members opted for early retirement and received two years’ severance pay. Had the college pursued the firings, it would have cost a lot more in legal fees and penalties. The AA VP told me that she knew I was playing some kind of game with the numbers, but admitted she could never figure it out. If the department chair had been as well informed, he could have justified firings, it would have cost a lot more in legal fees and penalties. The AA VP told me that she knew I was playing some kind of game with the numbers, but admitted she could never figure it out. If the department chair had been as well informed, he could have justified

2Yes, this has happened. I’ve also seen major equipment purchases canceled (and the funding lost) because deadlines weren’t met and a high-visibility degree program delayed (and subsequently never developed) because a state-mandated deadline for submission was missed.