The First Year in Office: Strategies and Tactics for Success

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MANY subjects of interest to department chairs—budgeting, personnel development, curriculum, and research development, for example—involves projects and problems whose scope is best measured in years. The first year of service is often crucial to later success, however, and some chairs have spent much of their terms trying to undo the damage that their inexperience produced in the first months. Departments differ tremendously, but there are certain principles and techniques of leadership that apply to almost all of them and that you should consider before taking office as chair.

Get acquainted with your colleagues. If you’re joining a new department as chair, this need will be obvious, but even if you are chairing a department you know, it is important to remember that, when you are chair, your familiar colleagues will not seem exactly the same as they did before; people you think you know well will surprise you. The sooner you can learn the details of these new relationships, the better. Go to lunch with colleagues, invest in “hall time” if that works well in your department, meet more formally if you must, but take the initiative to get reacquainted with each faculty member if you can. Listen to them more than you talk, ask them about their views and goals, and take note of each apparent change in people you thought you knew well.

Forget the hundred-day syndrome; set modest goals at first. It takes time to work into the job, establish priorities, and identify people who will get things done. You may know what you want to do, but the rest of the department does not, and you will probably change your mind before the first year is up. Give yourself time to discover what kind of chair you are. For most major changes and broad schemes, the second year is often better than the first.

Do set goals right away. Although your initial aims may be modest, do not spend your first semester doing just housekeeping activities. Establish goals for yourself and the department early and then publicly go to work on them. Do your best to ensure that faculty members know what you are trying to accomplish, why they should value it, and when you have achieved it. The most important evaluations of your work as chair will be made not on questionnaires but in people’s minds as they see you act. Develop ways to let colleagues know what you are doing without sounding as if you are blowing your own horn. The recruitment of new faculty members may well be your most significant contribution to the department as chair. Why not make that one of your first plans? In today’s market, it is often not too hard to attract candidates who are a bit stronger than those your department has found in the past.

Risk losing a line before hiring a problem. If you can’t hire with confidence, wait a year. Even if you must risk losing a line, that is preferable to thirty tenured years of a third-rate professor. Hire right and your department won’t have serious personnel management problems.

Avoid the cliché “we can and must do better.” This favorite opening line of new administrators implies that the department wasn’t doing a good job before and that the effort expended on the work of the department in the past is somehow irrelevant. While both implications may be true, they are rarely well received and productive, especially since they also carry the message that your new leadership will somehow be the department’s salvation. There are better ways to invite the faculty to join you in assessing the department’s progress and identifying appropriate goals and directions.

Assemble teams to help you; risk delegating too much. In small departments as well as large ones, each delegation of a task is usually a step in the right direction, but delegating is always educational. You will never really know what the members of your department can do until you give them a chance. When you can, involve more than one person in each general task; it is likely one of them will do well, and you need to identify such colleagues as soon as possible.

Discover what the faculty has in mind first. However wonderful your plans may be, you cannot accomplish them alone, which is exactly how you will be working if you finalize your plans the summer before you take office. During your first year, shine as an organizer who allows faculty members to develop plans, then get three feet out in front of them and lead brilliantly the next year.

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Have a personal goals meeting with every faculty member in your second semester as chair. Ask each one to bring you a developed, elaborated set of personal and departmental goals and ask that these include suggestions for you as well. Use these meetings to get better acquainted, to present preliminary responses to the goals, and to assure people that you are in office to help them achieve the appropriate goals they set for themselves and the unit. Do not use this time to sell your own ideas for the department unless you’re asked to. Instead, focus on the faculty members and their ideas.

If sacking is necessary and possible, do it early. If you’re lucky, this task won’t arise, but sometimes there is a staff member who should be let go, a probationary faculty member who is making unsatisfactory progress toward tenure, or a tenured faculty member who has an inappropriate assignment. If you can identify adequate support for discharging a staff person, failing to reappoint a faculty member, or reassigning a faculty member, then by all means take that step early and preferably in your first year. If there are negative consequences, they will have lost their edge by the time you’re ready to lead the department toward major new goals, and because you will have performed a valuable and long-needed service, many colleagues will appreciate your leadership. Whenever you consider aspects of this nature, however, be sure you carefully review the pertinent rules and regulations and act only with strong support from your colleagues and administrators.

Be accessible on a predictable basis. Secretaries, students, faculty members, and administrators alike hate to waste time trying to get in touch with you. Whatever your style—hallways encounters, open-door office, closed-door office, “catch me at home if you can”—make clear when and how you can be reached. If you are going to irritate people, do it over something worthwhile and not over the expense and trouble of trying to communicate with you.

Allow yourself the time and circumstances to get your own work done. One of your greatest problems will be finding sufficient uninterrupted time to do your essential work: writing, thinking, telephoning, reading. You must have that time, and the first year is when most people are worst at finding it. Learn to close your door, ignore your phone, and bring conversations to a polite close. Be accessible but not always.

Be a good listener and prove it. Some faculty members automatically dismiss a new chair as harmless until they are proved wrong. Others, however, view a new chair as a threatening loose gun until they are reassured. Make your careful (and therefore reassuring) listening skills evident and be sure to reassess those skills regularly. Ask questions that show you’ve been listening. Paraphrase what you think you’ve heard. Summarize your thoughts and the speaker’s and see how the other person responds. If you’re going to develop a reputation as a great talker, do it during your second year as chair.

Learn all the administrative details you can. Don’t do everything, just know how everything is done. Until you know exactly how work is done and who does it, people can pull the wool over your eyes. Ask questions, take notes, pay attention. Don’t just “let George do it, since it is his job.” Supervise your office staff members by learning as much about their jobs as you can right away. Remember they may all quit in November or, worse yet, reorganize themselves next week. Become your department’s best ambassador to other parts of campus, especially to those offices involved in vital administrative areas: accounting, personnel, travel, purchasing, and so on. Visit, act interested, find out what they can do for you and how.

Handle each piece of paper just once, and get somebody else to handle most of it. Paper can kill you faster than budget cuts or grieving faculty members. On your first day, develop a system for prioritizing the papers that come in:

- Send most of them to someone else for disposition.
- Don’t read your mail until you have time to act on it and then do so at once; it is the material you put aside until you really have time to deal with it that will break your back.
- Clear away as much paper as you can before you go home each day.
- Keep important work, memos, reminders, and so on in sight: mark deadlines on your calendar in red and use your desk drawers for paper clips, not paper.

Make it look easy. No one appreciates sacrifice very much or for very long, and no one will be grateful for your sacrifice. Go home when everyone else does, even if you are lugging papers in your briefcase to read before you go to bed. Look fresh, smile, be happy. Act as if you know what the heck you are doing and sooner or later you will. The image of quiet competence is worth a great deal. Meet deadlines a bit ahead of time, follow the rules, and save the innovative and exotic stuff for later.

Prove Orwell wrong, especially to the dean. George Orwell posited that bureaucrats did not dare tell the truth about what they did because the public, while supporting many of the bureaucrats’ actions, would not accept a public articulation of the theory behind the actions; as a result, he said, bureaucrats invented doublespeak. Your reputation will be established in your first year. Make refreshing candor your hallmark; it is worth a great deal in the long run—for its novelty if nothing else—and it will save you precious hours each week.

If the administration declares a crisis, wait awhile before you do the same. Crises often have a way of running out of steam. Of course you must be responsive to administrative directives but take time to consult with colleagues across the campus and think your way through a situation before galvanizing your faculty members with a call to arms. University governance is a collective endeavor, and chairs need to excel at keeping their heads when those above them may be losing theirs. Similarly, when faculty members come to you overflowing with a crisis of their own, resist the
temptation to climb on the emotional bandwagon. Counsel deliberate action based on confirmed facts. It’s amazing how many problems have solved themselves within a week.

Get to know your dean and make the administration a partner rather than an opponent. Common faculty attitudes aside, there is much to be gained from treating administrative officers as if they were there to help you: many are. Deans come in various packages, however. Some want to be kept informed and never surprised. Others find a steady flow of information trivial and bothersome. Some want to guide you through your first year. Others think you should take care of things on your own. Since chairs have a poor track record at changing deans’ behavior, accommodation on your part is the wisest course.

Make decisions; don’t waffle. Many of your decisions will turn out badly no matter what you do. Accept that fact and develop a reputation early for holding reasonable discussions and then acting decisively. Change your mind later if you must but remember that dawdlers come to be both avoided and ignored. Leaders make decisions, and good leaders make hard decisions.

Precedent is a guideline and a gift, not a prison. Faculty members will take advantage of you if they discover that an appeal to the way things have always been done will win the day, and, of course, no two people will agree on just what the precedent is. Let things run as they have been as much as you can but never be afraid to abandon a precedent when you need to. Half the people in a department are unhappy with most precedents anyway.

Don’t plan on serving only one term. By the end of your first few years you will have just learned to do your job well. It is unlikely that at that point you will feel like saying “I am ready to go back to my first love, teaching.” Plan on accomplishing most of what you will be remembered for during your second term in office.

If you have not inherited a procedures manual, create one. If your predecessor has not left you a thick and up-to-date book explaining how everything is done, you are unfortunately but not uncommonly so. Accept your lot but don’t pass it on. Start a procedures manual in your first week mainly for yourself—you can’t remember everything anyway—then leave it as a godsend for the next poor soul. Write down everything as soon as you learn how to do it, from procedures for handling the mail to minutes for department meetings to budget transfers.

Neither surprise nor wait for a committee. Committees require leadership. Raise issues ahead of time when you can, establish clear and reasonable timeliness, and try to keep yourself from being surprised by committee decisions. Attend as many committee meetings as you can if your department’s rules and practices allow that. Committees don’t, or shouldn’t, run departments, however much vital decision-making responsibility they may have. Work with your committees so that they help rather than hinder and so that they provide for faculty governance without sapping too much faculty time.

Have regular department meetings but keep them taut and significant. For a variety of bad reasons, some departments have drifted away from regular faculty meetings while others doze through interminable committee reports and trivia. Well-organized and efficient monthly meetings of one hour or less can enhance communication and participation in general while providing the chair with necessary visibility and a useful podium.

Be a good outside chair. Regardless of your previous inclinations, accept that you are the principal representative of your department in many situations and act accordingly. Attend those functions you used to avoid. Make sure your department is always represented. Promote your department with secondary school colleagues, the public, administrators, and your own students. (For example, does your department have a videotape that explains its special achievements?) Meet new people, seek new connections, function as a conduit of information. Contact principals of secondary schools who have sent your department its top students. Refine your association with the teacher-education units in your institution, remembering that future teachers are a major component of the enrollment in most language departments. Perhaps most important, do not give up your old activities and associations because you think you lack the time for them now. They may be among the most valuable resources you bring to your new job.

Be chair of the entire department. Unless your unit is particularly small, you probably didn’t know all segments of it equally well before you became chair. Get to know the part-time people, the graduate assistants, the staff members, and the rest of the department better than you used to. Don’t allow your old friends to appear closer to you than anyone else, even if they are so in private. Make peace with old adversaries if you can but treat them fairly in any event. And keep clearly in mind the special challenge of a foreign language department: seeing the department as such rather than as a loose collection of “language faculties” often competing for resources.

Be an individual, not a category. If you are a woman, don’t let men tell you that you have a different style or let women tell you that you should. If you’re a man, don’t let men tell you sexist jokes or let women tell you that you can never understand them. You needn’t be treated as “the minority chair,” “the dreamy boomer chair,” or any other manifestation of a category unless you allow yourself to be. Insist that you intend your leadership to benefit all members of the department.

Attend the ADFL Summer Seminar Workshop for New Chairs. If possible, do this before your first semester. Many new chairs have found this experience tremendously valuable and have returned to the seminars in later years. It’s amazing how much more productive it is to discuss techniques, problems, warnings, and so forth before the issues come up rather than after the battles have been fought. And you will feel better knowing that you have company on almost every issue.