

Conversation Peace: Building Leadership Collaboratively

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I accepted the position as department chair as an untenured assistant professor. I made the decision to enter administration at the end of my fourth year in a tenure-track position. I cancelled the job interviews I had scheduled at Research I institutions and decided to stay at a regional state university. My friends all told me that I was making an unwise decision and was taking a major gamble with my career. What if I was not promoted or did not gain tenure?

I decided to take a chance and try my hand at becoming an administrator in the largest department on campus, teacher education. I was the fourth department chair in five years so some stability was needed. We offered academic programs at five different locations with 35 full-time faculty members and several adjunct faculty members. Student enrollment hovered around 900, and our relations at the off-campus locations were not good.

Our dean thought that I possessed the leadership skills to quell the instability in the department as well as handle the issues related to our other locations. I was not so sure of that. The only endeavor I had undertaken in higher education that might qualify for leadership was directing grants. In my academic career, I had never supervised anyone. What I had done was to establish myself as an independent thinker with a personal and professional vision, and as someone willing to take tremendous risks. That was all that I brought to the administrative table. The dean saw more. His only request was that I commit to do the job for more than one year.

As part of my preparation for assuming the position, the dean sponsored my participation in a conference that prepared new chairs for their roles and responsibilities. I attended the conference, conducted by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. Information gained in the meetings was valuable. The most poignant piece of information gathered was that as a new chair, I should have a standing weekly appointment with the dean. This meeting would serve as a source of professional development for me as I became an administrator. It would also keep my dean informed about my concerns as I embarked on a new and challenging adventure. Upon return from the conference, I told my dean what I had learned and asked about the possibility of our meeting weekly as had been suggested. He agreed.

For the past three years, we have met almost every week. Our meetings have varied in length, depending on our agenda. What follows is a reflective work on how those meetings have benefited me in my role as department chair and helped to build leadership collaboratively for my department.

CONVERSATION PEACE

The meetings opened lines of communication. As a new chair, I was not sure how I would communicate with the dean. We had always had open discussions about issues related to fairness, social justice, and race relations in our community. Those conversations became the foundation for future conversations.

As we began our meetings, I shared with him my concerns for the faculty, our programs, and for the overall well-being of the department. I also shared my vision for the department, including short- and long-term goals. Over time, we discussed these goals and the direction the department would take as we worked to build consensus. The dean was able to warn me of potential pitfalls and challenges. Because I was new, he offered many times to shoulder the brunt of decisions that might reflect a negative light on me. His insight helped me shape my approaches to meeting the needs of the faculty and students while moving toward our goals. Through these meetings, he was also willing to share with me some of his goals for the college, which gave me a glimpse of his overall plan for improving teacher preparation in our region. I was able to begin lining up our departmental goals with his vision.

Our conversations were not always peaceable, but we were able to see the validity in certain aspects of the other's argument. After those difficult conversations, an additional conversation was sure to follow later in the week for further elaboration or clarification of the issues. While we did not always completely agree on every issue, we did agree to respect the view of the other. This agreement helped me become more willing to openly share my views and concerns with him. That openness set the stage for my professional growth as a leader.

BUILDING LEADERSHIP COLLABORATIVELY

Our conversations allowed us to get to know each other as professionals. During my first three years as an assistant professor, I worked hard to make a difference in my department and in our college. I worked to improve my teaching of reading and to increase the number of students of color enrolled in and completing our programs. My goal was for our department to be the regional location where students were recruited for teaching jobs. I held lofty goals and worked to achieve them. I also demanded much from my students in the classroom and held them accountable for their academic

progress. I tried to treat students and colleagues alike with dignity and respect and held high expectations for all. I had begun to develop into the kind of professor I had dreamed of becoming.

In accepting the role as department chair, I wondered how my image would be changed as I became an authority figure in the department. I wanted to maintain my high standards, but I also wanted to make sure that I met the needs of faculty and students in an equitable way that would generate harmony and cooperation, which had been absent from the department. I wanted to make life different in our department and yet remain progressive and open to the ideas of others. I wanted to keep peace.

My conversations with the dean helped shape the kind of department chair I have become. I learned that it was important for my decisions and behaviors to follow a path that showed consistency in thought that was congruent with our goals. My actions needed to always demonstrate my respect for the thoughts of others as well as my desire to incorporate their ideas into my decision-making. Through our conversations, I learned the necessity of collaboration in becoming an effective leader. I learned that in order to build consensus, individuals must be given opportunities to voice their opinions and concerns, and that their concerns must be heard and addressed.

I also learned that at times individuals must be gently led to new perspectives with new insight. In talking with the dean, I was often shown a different view of departmental matters. His perspective was much more global than mine, and in aiming to improve the department, I, too, had to learn to gain a more global view of my job. I had to widen and sometimes change my lens for viewing possibilities, challenges, and opportunities as they arose within the department.

In learning about the dean, I began to learn what to expect from him. I realized what his perspective was on many issues related to teacher preparation and on what the future possibly holds for colleges of education. I discovered what caused him discomfort in dealing with individuals, and I learned how to better articulate my questions in efforts to ease his discomfort. I was getting to know him better and beginning to understand his style of leadership. Through our meetings, he has shared with me much of what he does in his role as dean. He has collaborated with me on many issues, particularly those that deal with diversity, and has shown by example the importance of leading collaboratively. I have come to understand the importance of the role of the dean in the hierarchy of college and university administrators and how that role as perceived by the upper administrators often dictates what happens in the college.

CONCLUSION

My meetings with the dean have enhanced my performance as a department chair. Having a set time to meet each week and spending time openly discussing departmental matters has helped me think and grow. The meetings have helped me become a better planner as I prepared my concerns for discussion prior to the meetings, and have helped me give critical thought to possible expected outcomes of our discussions. I have learned to become a collaborator. Finally, I have learned how professional relationships are grown and nurtured. Without the meetings with the dean, I would have left my position as department chair after the first year. I am grateful to the dean of my college for his patience and willingness to help in my development.

In my first year as department chair, I gained tenure and was promoted.

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