



Department Chair Online Resource Center

Dealing with Challenging Faculty

“Dealing with Challenging Faculty.” *Academic Leader* 18(10) (October 2002): 1, 7. Reprinted with permission from [Magna Publications, Inc.](#)

One of the most difficult roles of the department chair is dealing with challenging faculty members, colleagues who for various reasons disrupt the work of the department. They are known by a variety of labels: bullies, jerks, prima donnas, procrastinators, CAVE dwellers (colleagues against virtually everything), and time bombs, to name a few.

Chairs find out who these difficult people are rather quickly. When promoted from within the department, chairs may notice behaviors of colleagues they hadn't observed previously. Sometimes chairs inherit the problems from their predecessors, and sometimes changes within the institution, the department, or the faculty member's personal life can bring out the disruptive behavior.

Handling these faculty members requires identifying causes of the problem and the appropriate course of action.

WHAT MAKES SOME FACULTY DIFFICULT?

Since the 1960s, James Hammons, professor of higher education leadership at the University of Arkansas–Fayetteville, has studied and conducted workshops on dealing with difficult faculty, and according to surveys of workshop participants, difficult behavior occurs most often when faculty

- Feel their work is underappreciated.
- Don't want to be held accountable. (“Faculty are not exactly comfortable with some of the things that have come down the pike in the last 10 years that require them to be a lot more accountable than they used to be,” Hammons says.)
- Like the way things are.
- Are afraid of change.
- Are a bad fit for the department.

Most of these causes are often the result of administrative action or inaction. For example, a chair might get upset with a faculty member for his or her reluctance to embrace distance learning and the use of technology. Often, that reluctance, mislabeled as recalcitrance, is the result of inadequate

training. Hammons recommends considering whether institution or department policies or procedures might be contributing to problem behavior before confronting the faculty member, rather than immediately placing the blame on the faculty for their negative behavior. “Sometimes the most difficult people are the most difficult because of the way they have been treated, and if I were in their shoes, I might be labeled as a difficult person as well,” Hammons says.

DOES THE BEHAVIOR WARRANT CHAIR INTERVENTION?

Some behavior can be annoying without being disruptive, so before confronting the faculty member, Hammons recommends that chairs consider whether the behavior affects students or colleagues. For example, a faculty member whose office appears disorderly may annoy a fastidious chair, but unless the clutter impairs that faculty member’s performance, it should not be the chair’s concern.

Unfortunately, problem behavior usually does not go away on its own, Hammons says. And in their efforts to resolve the problem, chairs often make the mistake of trying to appease the faculty member, but “that just seems to add fuel to the fire.”

Chairs also often fall into the trap of trying to understand what goes on in a person’s mind that causes them to behave in a certain way. Doing this can affect the way the chair treats the faculty member and can create hostility.

Instead of trying to read a person’s mind, Hammons recommends that chairs base their interactions with faculty on observable behavior.

COUNSELING

If a behavior negatively affects others, the chair should meet with that faculty member in private with no disruptions. The chair should be prepared to be very specific about what the problem is and to explain how the behavior affects others.

For example, a faculty member who gets his grades in late may not understand that it can affect a student’s financial aid, application to another institution, or employee tuition reimbursement. When the faculty members understand the effects of their behavior, they will be more willing to make changes.

“The goal of counseling is to get the faculty member to say, ‘I understand I have a problem.’ Until he or she says that, you’re never going to get anywhere trying to solve the problem,” Hammons says.

PROGRESSIVE DISCIPLINE

When the faculty are not convinced that their behavior affects others, the chair needs to talk to them about the personal consequences. Before meeting with the faculty member, the chair should leave a good paper trail detailing the actions taken to that point. The chair also needs to keep the dean informed about the situation and seek his or her support.

While the appropriate action depends on the severity of the behavior, Hammons advises that chairs apply the following guidelines to all situations that call for progressive discipline:

- Remain calm.
- Listen attentively.
- Be careful about word choice.
- Maintain eye contact.
- As the meeting progresses, summarize—or have the faculty member summarize—what you have agreed to.
- Use problem solving. Try to determine exactly what the problem is and be specific about what it would take to resolve the issue.