

Dealing with Conflict and Maintaining Faculty Morale – and Your Own

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Many of the references, stories, and explanations of concepts and arguments presented here are derived from:

- Personal experience as associate dean and now, chair;
- professional experience in faculty, staff, and student grievances and complaints;
- assisting Chairs and Directors with disciplinary and non-disciplinary matters and letters; and
- mediating or settling disputes, where applicable – and where possible. Unfortunately, ***sometimes it doesn't work.***

References to publications/sources are noted as appropriate.



**Conflict: It isn't fun. It's
caused by anyone –
including you
(and me).
It's our problem to
solve, and to prevent.**



1. Who and what causes conflict and when and where does it occur?

Duh.

Answer: Anybody, Anything, Anytime, and Anywhere over anything or about anybody, anytime and anywhere.

Remember: YOU are an easy target as "middle management."

Does this look familiar??? Is this you?



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2. Conflict and its Manifestations

"Being a chair is easy. It's like riding a bike, except the bike is on fire. **Everything is on fire. And you're in hell."** (A variation on an Internet meme about being an adult.)

Is This Your Department Meeting? Faculty Cats in Conflict!

- The **parliamentarian** faculty cat who doesn't listen well, but who expects everyone else to do so
- The **too-good-for-this-meeting** faculty cat. She's too important for all this
- The faculty cats who **annoy everybody**
- The tired, **sleepy faculty cat**
- The **Chair cat** who prepares carefully. She is **very brave** in leading this group and she checks her hair for fleas regularly. Nobody listens to a chair who scratches a lot.
- The **Assistant or Associate Chair** cat and their plans. What kind do you have, if you have one? I have one!
- The **competitive faculty cats** having hissy fits. The Chair must respond! Disciplinary letters!
- The almost always **absent faculty cats**

A Brief Interlude....



Just a little humor. It helps.

3. The Why: Causes of Conflict*

A timeless philosopher for timely topics: Thomas Hobbes.

Your life as charr need not be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

- Competition: for **gain**
- Diffidence: for **defense**
- Glory: for **reputation**

*These are Thomas Hobbes's "Causes of Quarrel" from *Leviathan*, Ch. 13, 1651.

Sources of Conflict in *Competition*: It's About Gain (Some Examples)

- You didn't ask "Famous Faculty Member," a legend in her own mind, to teach an unassigned course nor ask her opinion on who should be assigned to it. *The horror, the horror! REMEMBER: YOU are responsible for the course schedule. There is more than faculty preferences to it.*
- Winning (or not winning) awards; or being (or not) promoted. "You didn't fight hard enough for me."
- Agreeing (or not) with university or college administration. "You should resist these rules, you coward."

You are the supervisor, the manager, the evaluator, the scheduler; you're responsible for the budget. Don't let the complainers get you down. You are the "Sovereign" of your department.



Some Sources of Conflict in *Diffidence/Distrust and Self-Protection*

Some Examples

- **Resentment** of hierarchy ("I ought to have that job. I work hard.")
- Clashes of deeply held **convictions** ("Why don't you think the way I do???")
- **Coming to work:** "Do we really need to be on campus? After all, we can do meetings and classes by Zoom and Teams!"
- And a host of other sources such as:
 - Perceived pay disparities or differential treatment
 - Lack of understanding or acceptance of rules, policies, regulations, and laws

The Source of Conflict from *Glory/Reputation*

It's about our sense of self and the perception of our selves by others.

EXAMPLES

- **Professional Progress:** "Those people voted against me for promotion and tenure??? They're delusional."
- **Award Applications:** "I should have received that award, not you. I want my application re-reviewed."
- **Perception of Disrespect:** "You didn't consult with *me* about that. It's another example of lack of respect for me and my program."

4. The What (to do): Managing Conflict as Chair/Director

Remember this:

- You do NOT answer to your faculty. Make this clear.
- Your faculty answer to you.
- You answer to the Dean. The dean has put trust in you to do things right, to make good judgments, to do your best.
- If there is an intractable problem, seek the help of the Dean, other chairs and directors (they know stuff!), contract compliance, academic affairs.



Managing Conflict and Benefiting From it:

- There are benefits to conflict.
- One way to try to solve a problem is to find a way to direct it to productive conclusions.
- Consider Factions and Freedom

"Resolving conflict isn't about figuring out who is right and who is wrong. It's about making the department better" (George Justice, "Managing Conflict as a Department Chair," Chronicle of Higher Education, May 13, 2021).

The Benefits of Conflict

- If *Federalist 10* (James Madison) might be a rough guide, **"factions" can create problems, but they can also be beneficial:**

Snuff out factions, and limit liberty (academic freedom)

Control effects of factions, which is impossible and undesirable

AND

- J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, Ch. 2: **Silencing Ideas and Disagreements is a Bad Idea**
 - True, and lose it
 - False, and no chance to defeat it
 - Combination, and still lose both benefits
 - Absolutely true, or accepted, and turns to dogmatism and lack of opportunity

Managing Conflict with Benefits

- Encourage, **model**, and promote civility, honor, disagreement, toleration, compromise, cooperation to the best of your ability*
- Ensure that **all "factions"** have equal or equitable opportunity to make their **voices heard**
- **Different ideas** tend under the best circumstances to lead to better ideas and practices.

*See C.K. Gunsalus, et al., "Challenged Academic Units," *Inside Higher Education*, Apr 25, 2018.

End Conflict

- **By solving the problem**
 - Gain and maintain **trust**
 - Address **obstreperous behavior** when it occurs
 - **Listen** to those experiencing conflict
 - **Communicate; explain; justify**
- **When it can't be solved, move on**
 - **Letters of counsel, instruction, reprimand**
 - Referring employees to an **Employee Assistance Program**
 - Appropriately monitoring behavior consistent with CBA requirements. ***READ THE CBA.***

Improving and Maintaining Morale: Common Sense

- **Recognize achievements**
- **Participate** in unit activities
- **Create** and maintain a unit culture of **respect for support staff**
- **Follow through on *your* promises** and commitments
- **Encourage and model** civil discussion and cooperation, but don't back down from bullies and whiners.
- **React to incivility and lack of cooperation** by addressing it appropriately where and when it occurs
 - In department meetings, individually, and between disputing parties

Give Yourself a Break: Your Morale Counts, Too. (This is Important Advice. You should take my advice on this because I'm not using it.)



Teddy

- **Go home and hug somebody, or watch tv in bed with your cat.**
- **Talk to a friend** who understands you & what you do.
- **Thank that friend. *Thank them more*** by being there and listening to them, too.
- **Ask for help** when you need it.
- **Make friends** with other chairs and directors. **They** know lots of stuff.
- Take time for **lunch**.
- Take **annual leave**