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."
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.)

Does this look familiar??? Is this you?
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
3. The Why: Causes of Conflict*

A timeless philosopher for timely topics: Thomas Hobbes.

Your life as chair 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
It's about our sense of self and the perception of ourselves 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, tolerance, 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.

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.)

- 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