

# Dealing with Deans and University Administrative Offices

The chair's role is partly a first-among-equals faculty position, but it is also partly an administrative role. The chair is expected to implement university policies, to enforce rules, and to respond to directives from the dean and other administrators. The chair's appointment is usually at the dean's pleasure, and the dean usually conducts the chair's annual evaluation. The university bureaucracy, although it may seem alien and impenetrable, is also potentially a tool the chair can use to get things done. Chairs will be effective in direct proportion to their mastery of relations with deans and bureaucracy.

## Deans and Their Motives

Deans once were faculty, and usually will return to the faculty when they finish their terms as deans. Some have broader ambitions in administration, but only a few go on to vice-presidencies or presidencies. While serving as deans, they are expected to assume a corporate management perspective—their most pressing and urgent duties have to do with budgeting and resource allocation, public relations, and the management of people. Deans are considered successful (in the eyes of presidents and trustees) when they can show increases in external funding, improvements in the national reputation of their departments or programs, increasing enrollments, and demonstrable gains in the efficiency of college operations. If they can be innovative in improving the quality of teaching and learning, especially if this pays off in publicity, so much the better.

Deans are expected to play a very public role, one that shows the university off to best advantage. They play corporate promoter with the press, with potential donors, with important political supporters of the university, and with the corporate and civic leaders of the community, state, and nation. They help presidents translate needs into funding opportunities, and they help articulate the university's ambitions to the professional and lay public. Successful deans work hard to recruit the best faculty and students, raise whatever money they can, blend people and money into excellent programs, and promote the results in a continuing entrepreneurial quest. They are judged by how much they contribute to the university's bottom line—measured in money, image, and prestige.

Deans are expected to have goals and strategies. They have to deal with a variety of higher-level bureaucracies, each of which expects them to be able to say they have rational plans in place to do what the bureaucrats expect. Budget planners like to think ahead, and they particularly like to think about numbers that increase. Program planners like to think about quality and excellence, and they especially like to have numbers that demonstrate quality and excellence. Facilities planners like to think about new facilities. Deans seem to be constantly trying to satisfy various planners' deadlines, and, in the process, to be setting goals for time horizons that are quite beyond most chairs' ambitions for their own terms of office.

Although ambitious deans may drive chairs to distraction, deans who do not fit the entrepreneurial, promotional pattern are probably going to hurt their colleges in the long run. Those who merely preserve the status quo, who serve as brokers and mediators rather than as promoters, who follow rather than lead, who “satisfice” rather than challenge, will be viewed from the top levels of the university as “losers,” as deans without ambition, and as place holders more concerned with their own security and salary than with the greater glory of the university. Successful deans learn quickly to play on the fast track, and they need very much to be supported by chairs and by faculty who can keep up to top-competition speed.

### **Dean’s Styles**

Deans are as varied in their styles as chairs are in theirs. But a few characteristic patterns *can* be outlined—with of course the caveat that none exists in its pure form. Chairs may well reflect on the dean’s style in order to anticipate how the dean might behave in predictable situations.

The *tyro* dean is young, enthusiastic, energetic, and slightly smitten with the heady responsibilities and status that go with the job. The tyro often enters the deanship with high ideals and ambitions, and is particularly quick to adopt the trappings and symbols of corporate management. The tyro will be under considerable pressure to “look good” to presidents and provosts, and will be quick to respond with tough decisions, grand plans, and projections. The young, fresh dean is likely to be politically naïve, and may be particularly obtuse about how the faculty view him or her. This dean will be quick to give inspirational speeches, and to lay out for the faculty a planned route to greatness.

Tyro deans are unknown quantities. Some will quickly become disillusioned, and resign after short terms. Others will learn and persist, growing in office and ultimately doing the college a great deal of good. Chairs can adapt to younger deans by helping them form realistic goals and plans, by assisting them with contacts, by supporting and shaping their image with faculty, and by offering whatever counsel and advice their experience may equip them to offer. Tyro deans often are viewed as investments in the future by the university hierarchy and they may receive a great deal of higher-level support in the early going. When a university hires a young, energetic, visionary dean, it is often sending a signal to the college that it expects a good deal more in the future. Chairs should be able to perceive that message, and orient themselves to helping the tyro dean realize the ambitions he or she was sent to pursue. Young deans who are successful frequently have enough time left in their careers to advance in higher-level administration.

At the other end of the continuum are deans who achieve their positions as senior *statesmen*. Not only do these deans bring considerable personal stature to their positions, but they probably have relatively distinguished records in their own academic fields. Unencumbered by personal needs for achievement and recognition, statesmen deans sometimes outrank vice-presidents in prestige and power.

Statesmen deans see their enterprise in baldly objective terms. They know where the strengths are, where the weaknesses are, and who has political connections and power. They waste little motion or energy on bureaucratic games, and they cut through fantasies with a terrible swift sword. On the other hand, statesman deans are capable of both realistically planning and achieving their objectives with admirable effectiveness. They know how to put initiatives together, and they know how to achieve results. Although they may be very happy to share the public credit for their achievements, they also have no illusions about the roles that the various actors may have played.

Chairs almost always wind up playing subordinate roles to statesman deans. There is no dishonor in this; a chair may, in fact, benefit enormously from a statesman's achievements. Statesmen welcome solid, sensible, goal-directed chairs. They are not threatened by independence and initiative, but they have little patience or regard for chairs who signal that they are simply going along for the ride—without making any real contribution to the advancement of the department or college. Chairs working under statesman deans are well-advised to act as team players and to keep their departments up to speed during this kind of regime. Statesmen do not have to spend much time ingratiating themselves to faculty, and are quite able to walk away from the weaker units without fearing political reprisals.

Many deans are best characterized as *managers*. They move into deanships from middle-of-the-road careers, often having moved in orderly fashion from positions in faculty governance through department chairs to associate deanships. They are tested, safe, conventional, and well known and regarded within the institution. Although they will respond to, and function in, the promotional culture of top management, they do so with relatively limited vision and with considerable attention to the consultative processes they have undoubtedly learned well over the years. Managers' regimes are usually marked by no dramatic departures from the status quo (unless by accident of unusually good luck). Their terms in office are also marked by stability, and so are often forgettable because there are no achievements of any momentous dimensions. Managers survive during periods of relative prosperity, but may be less well suited to periods of stress and change.

Chairs can almost always work comfortably with manager deans. Managers are insiders, familiar with the status quo, and not anxious to make upsetting changes. They readily horse-trade and compromise, and they respect the sacred processes of collegial governance. On the other hand, they can hurt the college by failing to push, promote, or provoke change and development. Chairs may have to assume a greater responsibility for leadership under these regimes, particularly if the manager seems to be avoiding opportunities, neglecting public relations, or operating too conservatively. Manager deanships often require of chairs a delicate balance between being loyal team players and being entrepreneurial.

Some deans, whether out of insecurity or because they have never learned how to lead, operate very much as tyrants and bullies. Chairs can almost never be effective under such regimes. *Dictator* deans usually focus on achieving power and personal status—and usually do so at others' expense. They may promote new

ideas and progressive programs, but they do so with an almost pathological sense of ownership. They expect obedience and loyalty in all matters, and, particularly, they expect subordination of others to their will. In some cases, dictators do make great strides in improving a college's visibility and image—largely because doing so is associated with their own self-promotional needs. However, they also leave a trail of bitter feelings, low morale, and disorganization. They are often impulsive, secretive, opportunistic, and vindictive. They are successful in coercing people to do their bidding, but they almost always alienate these same people.

Chairs can take small comfort in knowing that dictators universally sow the seeds of their own downfall. Their only hope is to hunker down and outlast the regime. However, knowing that they may very well succeed in outlasting what may be a brief reign, chairs can be quietly active and effective during such periods. Most importantly, it is a time to build alliances—with faculty, with the central administration, and with important people outside the institution. None of this alliance building can be visible, because it will threaten the dictator, but it must go on, and it should be seen as an investment in the department's long-term stature.

Obviously these caricatures do not do justice to the wide array of styles. They merely represent some common “types” to the extent that typing is at all fruitful. Mainly, chairs should be aware that each dean is different from every other dean, and that he or she should plan to adjust and calibrate his or her behavior to play to a dean's strong points and compensate for the weaknesses.

### **Developing Trust**

Deans and chairs have to trust each other if they are to work together effectively. Because the chair will ultimately be judged by the dean, it is important to build a relationship in which the dean is able to communicate expectations and in which the chair is able to seek advice and feedback in an open and honest fashion. The chair must also be able to get the dean's support when it is needed. The dean must therefore have confidence in the chair's judgment and in his or her political legitimacy with the faculty.

Building and nurturing a good relationship with a dean may take a substantial effort. If a college is large, a dean may have a dozen or more chairs to deal with, as well as a cast of center directors, assistant and associate deans for various things, and the university bureaucracy. The dean may be virtually uninformed about important departmental matters because he or she is almost always over-loaded with information from the many channels that feed into the office. On the other hand, the chair may be substantially uninformed about the dean's perspectives, plans, and problems. Deans are often off-campus, closeted in meetings, bedeviled by problems and crises, and preoccupying themselves with promotional activities which are just as often command performances for central administrators as self-initiated.

Certainly, deans have every opportunity to be superficially informed. Annual and more frequent reports reach the dean's office through formal channels.

Memos, records of grant and contract activity, publicity from all quarters, and voluminous records of committee and council proceedings all are funneled through the dean's office. Most deans make a responsible effort to screen their own mail, and to pick up information that is useful. Some use the telephone or email networks as a way to stay in touch. But deans are busy people, and they cannot possibly find out everything it would be useful for them to know. They depend on their department chairs to play an active role in communicating. *Chairs should learn what the dean considers an effective way to communicate and master it.*

There is one extremely ineffective style of communicating with deans: keeping secrets and waiting until problems become crises. Chairs who go to a dean with a plea for a budget bailout, or who undertake to discipline a faculty member, or whose faculty votes to reject a new program proposal initiated by the dean without having taken the trouble to pass along useful information and perspective prior to the fact, will find, at best, a cool reception in the dean's suite. Chairs may feel that the dean is paid to deal with crises, and that problems can simply be dumped at the door. Chairs who adopt this attitude will have short terms in office; short and unhappy. Deans are human, and they mightily resent having to solve others' problems. They especially resent being blindsided by situations already out of control.

Chairs, on the other hand, may fear the open and candid sharing of their own problems. Deans, they assume, will not want to hear bad news, nor hear that the chair needs advice and support. To the contrary, a dean is experienced enough to know that no department is free of problems. The dean, understandably, does not want to be in the position of solving every such problem. Chairs are expected to take as much responsibility as possible. But deans need to *know about* potential problems, and their support for the chair is more likely to follow if they have had a hand in counseling the chair through early efforts to achieve resolution.

Since deans seldom have the time to seek out chairs for regular consultation, chairs should assume that the burden is on them to schedule reasonably frequent face-to-face meetings. Usually, important issues need to be discussed, options explored, and solutions worked out jointly. Communication by memo or electronic mail seldom permits the kind of understanding that can be achieved in a personal conversation.

Depending on the dean's calendar and routine, such face-to-face meetings may be as regular as a standing weekly lunch date, or as infrequent as a half-hour talk every two months. The chair should be highly sensitive to the way in which this schedule affects the dean's impression, and he may even want to keep an informal diary as a reminder of things that have been discussed, agreements that have been reached, follow-up activities to be conducted, and sources of potential disagreement or conflict. If meetings are infrequent such a record becomes critical, because the chair's memory may be selective, and he or she may approach subsequent meetings with agenda that do not bear any relationship to the dean's expectations.

Chairs should prepare carefully for each meeting with the dean. Although the relationship may be a personal one, and although the dean may be relaxed and informal, his or her time is valuable, and there is an expectation that the chair will have an agenda, information worth sharing, and questions that only the dean can answer. Deans like to hear good news, so it is almost always a good idea to let them be the first to hear about accomplishments that bring credit to the university. Deans are not afraid to deal with problems, but rather like to be involved in preventing them or in helping the chair solve them while they are still manageable. Part of the agenda should be in dealing with anticipated events and issues—items on which the chair seeks perspective and advice prior to any action. Obviously, if a problem is developing and the chair is in less than complete control of events, this should be shared.

In some cases the chair must communicate immediately, not waiting for a routine standing appointment. But deans should never be surprised with unwelcome news. They especially should not have to deal with faculty, staff, or students referred to them without notice. Sending an angry person to one's superior is guaranteed to create the impression that one is incompetent or out of control, or both. The dean will undoubtedly lose some confidence in the chair after two or three such episodes.

Obviously, trust is best developed when both sides in a relationship learn how to anticipate what another is likely to do. It is also built through open communication and a mutual effort to keep each other fully informed. Chairs often must take more of the burden in this relationship; they put themselves at considerable risk if they fail to find the best way to communicate with the dean and if they do not use available channels effectively.

### **Dealing with Bureaucracy**

As large corporate entities, universities accumulate bureaucracy. These offices are needed to maintain facilities, to keep money flowing, to hire and supervise literally thousands of employees, to process grants and contracts, to admit students, to house and feed them, to assure compliance with dozens of state and federal laws, to publicize the institution, and to secure gifts and contributions. To new chairs the scope and power of the bureaucracy may be intimidating, or at least discouraging. Certainly its complexity is daunting.

Although the bureaucracy may appear neither helpful nor useful to the chair, its reason for being is to be both. The chair will find getting things done is easier in direct proportion to the extent that he or she has the cooperation and assistance of specialists in the various departments, nooks, and crannies of the bureaucracy. Several offices are likely to be particularly worth cultivating.

Departments depend heavily on having competent, efficient staff. These people are usually recruited, screened, classified, and evaluated by a university-wide personnel department. Personnel specialists also negotiate contracts with unions for various civil service units, and are thoroughly knowledgeable about the

rules for all non-faculty employees. The personnel department is particularly helpful in two respects. They can assist a department in analyzing its staff needs and locating employees to fill jobs. They can also provide guidance and support when disputes or problems arise in the performance of a staff person. Getting to know the institution's personnel officer (or staff) may smooth the way when help is required.

Budgeting sets the stage for many decisions about the department's future. The department chair may have to deal with several key people in the process of putting the budget request together. Formally, the dean and his or her staff will ordinarily transmit information about the calendar for budgeting, guidelines as to what should be included, and how the department's case should be presented. The dean may set general policy guidelines in response to directives from the provost. The dean also will have particular guidelines in mind for the college's budget. Since all of these guidelines are well established before the department chair ever sees a call for his or her own budget request, any special issues that may be important to the department should be raised and discussed with the dean well before the formal process gets underway. This means that the chair must be thinking about the actual budget year two years ahead of time.

There is usually a person in the dean's office whose responsibility is to handle the technical routine of budgeting, and to implement all the procedures and guidelines according to deadlines and time frames. These individuals, although they typically play a very limited role in making judgments about budget policy, are also very likely to be the best-informed people about how to get what one needs from the budget process. They may also be powerful if they have been in place very long, and if they have information with which to be influential. It is wise to use these people for counsel and guidance, and to be prompt and responsive when information is requested by them.

There are also people in the dean's office who are in a position to help the department chair. They process vouchers and faculty or staff contracts, approve purchases, distribute paychecks, and handle all the routine business functions that keep the college and department going on a day-by-day basis. Almost always invisible to the chair, the business office is the hub of the college's operational work, and is often the key unit from which departmental staff take their cues. Because they can make a very large difference in the department's ability to do its business, the staff of this office are people who should be cultivated. Not only are they in a position to process paperwork and approve or disapprove important transactions, but they are often avenues to other university business operations wherein it may be helpful to have good contacts.

Many departments have grants and contracts with various agencies. The university almost always delegates responsibility for processing grants through a separate office—sometimes housed in a vice-presidential unit, and sometimes in the graduate dean's office. This office may have final authority to obligate the university in any grant or contract relationship. Faculty, department chairs, or deans may not have any authority in these matters at all. Grants and contracts

people can decline to approve a grant application, and they can insist that faculty principal investigators live up to grant or contract terms during the project. They also may have the power to audit projects to assure fiscal responsibility, protection of human subjects, and compliance with various laws and regulations. Grants and contracts administrators are sometimes in a position to take the side of the funding agency in any dispute. They are potentially important people to any department that processes a significant amount of external funding.

Chairs will find that there are other university administrative offices on campus whose work, while comparatively anonymous, may nevertheless affect substantially the ability of the department to do its work. Although almost always non-faculty, these people are relatively senior in standing, know a great deal about the rules and operations of the university, and sometimes have substantial power. A chair may be unaccustomed to working with or socializing with non-faculty and may even be uncomfortable in doing so. But an effective department chair will personally take the time to learn from and cultivate the key actors in the university bureaucracy. He or she will also encourage department support staff to get to know the support staff in these administrative offices. They can help plan, assist with the inevitable flow of paperwork, and serve as resource people when problems arise. They sincerely want to be helpful and to do their jobs in a constructive way. To be treated with respect and to feel that they are authorities about their specialties is flattering—especially when they seldom experience deferential treatment from academics. A chair who takes the time to get to know and respect the nonacademic bureaucracy may have unusual success in cultivating allies and supporters who will be tremendously useful when the chair finds he or she most needs help.

Building maintenance and campus security can be particularly important units for departments that have laboratories, storerooms, and other substantial facilities to maintain and protect. If people in these units feel comfortable approaching the chair, they may be quick to point out hazards and potential security problems, and serve to prevent losses.

In this chapter the chairs' relations with various important administrative offices has been explored. For most chairs, learning the administrative side is a considerable challenge. That challenge can be reduced to the extent that the chair is willing to make friends and allies of people in the administrative chain of command. These individuals are in a position to help keep the machinery of the department running smoothly so that the faculty under the leadership of the chair can perform their teaching, research, and service functions with a minimum number of unnecessary delays and interruptions.

## **Questions**

1. How would you describe the leadership and management style of your dean?



2. To what extent are you aware of the goals or aspirations that the dean has for the college as a whole, or for your department in particular? Do you support and/or agree with those goals and aspirations?
3. How have your dean's decisions affected your department within the last two years either as chair or as a faculty member? Were the decisions beneficial?
4. Do you have regular meetings with the dean on a one-to-one basis? Are these meetings frequent enough to ensure a strong communication link between yourself and the dean? Do you initiate the meeting or does the dean?
5. To what extent is the dean aware of the achievements of your department, faculty, and students? Of the problems in your department?
6. To what extent do you as chair, or the support staff of the department, have positive working relationships with individuals in the institution who have administrative responsibility for processing budget expenditures, contract and grants, travel, personnel, and so on?