**Evaluating the Chair**

The chair’s most fundamental responsibility is to do what it takes to keep the department solvent, functioning, and changing with the field. For the chair, evaluation is the total of accumulated impressions of others about whether he or she is doing the job that is expected.

**Who Evaluates the Chair**

Chairs are evaluated by faculty and deans, both of whom depend heavily on them to administer the department. Each has very specific ideas about what an effective chair should be doing and how he or she should be handling the job. These evaluations may or may not be handled in a formal way, but either way the chair should be aware of the significance of the impressions formed and of the potential impact of individual acts on the evaluation. Sometimes the chair will find that expectations of deans and faculty are not entirely consistent with one another and that it is inviting stress to try to satisfy more than one set of criteria for effective job performance.

Expectations may develop in a variety of ways. Chairs may enter their jobs without a clear description thereof and even without otherwise knowing very much about what they are expected to do. They may also enter with marching orders from the dean and/or the faculty—not only to discover that this kind of imperative is too narrow with respect to other things the chair will be expected to do on the department’s behalf. It is up to the chair to discover the totality (for the time being) of what is expected and how to apportion effort so that at least a good percentage of these expectations have a reasonable chance of being met.

Although the specific expectations of faculty and deans may vary from situation to situation and time to time, there are certain bedrock things that chairs *must* do in order to serve the department well. They must see that routine work is done. They must handle the flow of management tasks required by not only the dean but also the university. They must communicate well with both faculty and administration. They must exercise supervisory authority over the faculty while respecting the faculty’s professionalism. They must acquire and control fiscal resources to accomplish the department’s work. They must plan.

Even when there is agreement about what the chair is supposed to do, there may be differences among faculty and between faculty and deans about how the chair is performing. A dean, for example, may place heavy emphasis on prompt and thorough reports. Faculty, on the other hand, may come to see the reporting process as burdensome and bureaucratic. While a chair puts forth great effort to meet the dean’s expectations, he or she may also find that faculty do not value (and indeed may criticize) these efforts. On the other hand, the faculty may wish to see schedules changed to accommodate their expectations for a new curriculum sequence. So, the chair may work hard over several months to accommodate individual teaching-schedule preferences, and to move large classes from one time period to another. But then the dean may not be aware of, or appreciate, the amount of attention the chair gives to making these changes. In fact, the dean may only hear from his or her staff about the *problems* that these changes are causing—for example with the registrar, and with departments whose schedules also must be shifted to accommodate change. Thus the criteria used by deans for judging the chair’s performance may differ from those used by faculty. Both may have limited information on which to base their evaluations. The chair must be aware of these potentially conflicting and sometimes incomplete perspectives and would be well advised to leave a well-marked trail of performance, so that all sides are able to make reasonably valid judgments.

**Faculty Expectations**

Faculty view the chair through many lenses. They are independent and judgmental by training and experience and they may be very free in providing critical feedback to the chair. Nevertheless, they do form one of the chairs most important constituencies and their views can ultimately determine how successful a chair will be. Faculty perspectives on the chair’s performance come from their own contact with the chair and with the kind of impact the chair has on their ability to do their jobs. Faculty usually evaluate the performance of department chairs in at least three areas: managerial, academic, and political.

MANAGERIAL PERFORMANCE

Although chairs at most institutions consider themselves principally to be faculty members, their acceptance of the position of department chair places them in a managerial relationship to faculty. Faculty do not like to perceive themselves as being managed, but some management is necessary nevertheless. The chair is expected to assign teaching and other duties, to establish equity among the loads carried by individual faculty, to communicate expectations on behalf of the university, and to hold faculty accountable for performing their duties. If the chair handles these duties with fairness, objectivity, candor, and a reasonable amount of flexibility, faculty will (for the most part) appreciate the chairs’ management efforts.

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Chairs are also expected to have a clear sense of the academic and professional norms and issues that drive what faculty do. Faculty are participants in a discipline or profession that requires them to pay attention to developments far beyond the boundaries of their employing institution. Their teaching, their research support, and their success at publication all derive from their ability to master the key intellectual issues of the field. This, rather than slavish observation of the conventions and daily routines of one’s own college or university, constitutes the meat of a faculty member’s self-defined “work.” A chair who does not appreciate the intensity of faculty members’ involvement in this external world of professional colleagues and pure intellectual pursuit, or who is not “up to speed” on the latest developments, may well be perceived in a negative light.

Some chairs, of course, may be far more engaged intellectually than are members of the faculty in general. For these chairs, the hazard is of a different kind—they may be perceived as *too* disengaged from the routine matters of departmental management and not sufficiently effective at getting the normal work done. They may also be active enough on the national scene to be perceived with some envy by those faculty who have lost touch, or who have lost interest in, and commitment to, the genuinely intellectual life.

Obviously, chairs need to balance and calibrate their own involvement in the field. Perhaps they need to work hard at keeping up to speed in departments that are alive and leading the field—but they also need to provide leadership in focusing people’s attention and energy on the day-to-day business of the department. On the other hand, they may need to push for more attention to important intellectual and professional issues in a department that has grown too comfortable with its own way of doing business. In either case, it pays for the chair to be perceived as at least *adequately* interested in the major trends and developments in the field.

POLITICAL PERFORMANCE

The third area in which faculty expectations provide a basis for evaluating the chair is the exercise of political skills. All departments experience more-or-less visible struggles over power and resources in which faculty may compete to control others and to get at least their own share of scarce commodities (monetary increases, essential equipment, best students, and so on). Chairs usually are in a strong position of influence over the distribution of advantages considered valuable by faculty. And faculty are quick to perceive the fairness and justice with which chairs handle the distribution of valuable resources. They also are quick to perceive whether a chair is effective or ineffective in managing the peculiar political conflicts in the department.

Chairs may expect that faculty will *differ* among themselves in how they evaluate the managerial, academic, and political dimensions of the chair’s performance. Inevitably some faculty will find themselves feeling deprived, ignored, and unappreciated. However, although the chair will try to be as fair and humane as possible, there is no way to satisfy everyone. Negative feedback in inevitable, and the chair will just have to put such feedback in an appropriate context.

**The Dean’s Expectations**

Chairs are perceived by deans to be members of a management team. Deans therefore evaluate chairs according to criteria that differ greatly from those used by faculty. Although deans may associate a chair’s performance with the overall performance of his or her department, they also evaluate chairs in terms of how well they seem to behave as managers.

Deans expect chairs to be advocates for their departments, but they also expect them to condition their advocacy upon an awareness of the larger picture. There are limits to what deans can do for individual departments without damaging others, and they depend on chairs to be intelligent and mature enough to see this reality. Although it may create inner problems for the chair in terms of divided loyalties, the dean expects members of the college’s administrative team ultimately to act in the interest of the greater number—namely, the college as a whole.

Deans will value chairs who are open, communicative, and honest. Chairs who hide information from the dean, who are secretive, who avoid talking with the dean, are not perceived as being helpful. They often become objects of suspicion to the extent that they themselves are suspicious and perhaps afraid of open contact with the dean. Deans themselves must have timely and reliable information in order to be effective managers, and so must rely in turn on chairs to provide them with precisely that. Being open about problems helps everyone to cope with situations that may, in fact, be larger than just a single department. Open lines of communication foster problem-solving behavior and help avoid the kind of festering conditions that invite open conflict and publicity. Thus, a dean’s major interest is in having chairs communicate clearly and accurately concerning their department.

Deans appreciate chairs who are decisive and willing to act. Although they want to know what is going on in departments, deans do not want to be expected to solve everyone’s problems. They may be willing to consult and support chairs in making decisions, but they hire chairs to manage the departments. They will not appreciate having every decision “kicked upstairs” by chairs who do not have the courage to act. A chair’s passing of the buck in this manner puts the dean in the position of being the “bad guy” and is a transparent ploy by the chair to salvage his or her own position *at the dean’s expense.*

Deans value chairs who are able to look at a situation objectively and to plan appropriately for a course of action that meets the demands of the situation. It often is tempting for the chair to “play to the audience”—in this case, the departmental faculty. A chair who sees his or her role as principally that of an advocate for the department may act in a partisan manner that ignores the realities facing the dean. Just as government at all levels is faced with strident “single issue” lobbies that refuse to compromise their interests, so a department chair who cannot look at objective reality will be perceived as nettlesome and unhelpful to a dean who must stretch resources over ever-expanding needs.

On the other hand, chairs who are adaptable and try to work within the limits of the situation are likely to be seen by deans as valuable members of the management team. Chairs who work to construct advantage for their departments within the rules and the available resources benefit from the dean’s respect and usually earn themselves more latitude for initiative. Yet chairs are not expected to be bootlickers or uncritical handmaidens of the dean’s whim; weak chairs are not usually seen in a positive light by deans. Articulate advocates for departmental needs and interests who can work constructively within limits are the ones invariably viewed with high regard.

Being a member of a team puts a premium on showing certain other qualities as well. Deans will expect chairs to be both loyal and discreet. They will have conferences with chairs in which both sides speak candidly and openly about their views and objectives. Sometimes deans will share information with all chairs at a meeting, sometimes individually. In either event, the dean is depending on the chair to behave professionally and to preserve confidences in appropriate ways. They will expect chairs to use information, but to do so in the best interests of the college. Chairs who use their contacts with the dean to bolster their own stature with leaks and rumors based on information the dean has provided in confidence will be perceived as disloyal and indiscreet. Deans will quickly learn who can be trusted and who cannot.

Loyalty is not limited to maintaining confidences. Deans and chairs typically maintain a working relationship over a period of years. Neither can do an effective job without the other’s support and confidence. They must have a tacit understanding that they are going to work as a team, and the dean must have confidence in the chair’s trustworthiness. Chairs who engage in manipulation, intrigue, power plays, and end-runs that thwart a dean’s ability to manage will not long enjoy the dean’s confidence.

Deans will evaluate chairs on the basis of the latters’ ability to act selflessly or altruistically. Administrators are supposed to promote the greater good. They should be secure enough in their own careers and personal lives to be able to serve others’ interests and needs in ways that advance educational objectives of the institution. Chairs who take the job to stroke their own egos or to advance themselves for personal reasons, chairs who assert powerful motives for self-gratification, may find that deans have little patience or sympathy for behavior that is fundamentally egocentric. Chairs’ time and energy should be directed towards supporting others and providing a productive educational environment in which faculty and students alike can thrive. Deans do not long support chairs who insist on perks, special attention, public notice, or funding for pet projects. On the other hand, chairs who unstintingly help others achieve their own ends will always be seen in a very favorable light.

Deans expect chairs to show a reasonable amount of courage, but also the good judgment to balance decisiveness with prudence. Chairs must make decisions that are not always popular with faculty or students. Sometimes chairs will try to maneuver themselves into positions that allow them to evade the taking of such responsibility. Typically, a chair who fears making an unpopular decision will try to make it appear as if the dean is making him or her do it. Deans are no more anxious to play the role of tough decision-maker than are chairs. They are particularly unhappy when a chair repeatedly shies away from taking a strong stand.

On the other hand, deans are not so unrealistic that they expect chairs to be trigger-happy, or so full of bravado that they relish making controversial decisions. Prudent chairs, those who can make decisions that are carefully considered and proportional to the circumstances, will earn the deans’ respect. Such chairs do what the circumstances require, but do not needlessly entangle the dean (or others) in controversy or imbroglio.

Deans value energetic and productive chairs. A chair who is distracted by or committed to other activities, or who simply cannot sustain a level of effort needed to do the job, will eventually begin to cause distractions for the dean. Being unavailable for telephone calls, missing (or skipping) meetings, failing to follow up on correspondence, being late with reports, and otherwise appearing uncommitted or disinterested are behaviors that signal to the dean that the chair is not able to handle the requirements of the job. Deans need chairs who will work hard to help things run smoothly, who will complete assignments, and who will not complain about onerous but essential chores. As in any setting where teamwork is essential, chairs will have to calibrate their contributions and their productivity to the expectations and norms of the leader. Deans will be very sensitive to who is able to keep up with the pace they demand and who is lagging behind and letting others carry the burden.

HANDLING FEEDBACK

Chairs will receive both formal and informal feedback on their performance in a variety of forms. The chair needs to sort out what kind of feedback is useful and valid, and what kind is not. Sometimes chairs will be subject to public or private comments about their leadership (or lack of leadership) from faculty or others who may be upset and are lashing out at convenient targets. Or a faculty union may publish an annual “rating” of administrators’ effectiveness that is less than flattering. Although the chair must take all evaluative comments and feedback seriously, he or she should also be cautious about lending too much weight to random individual comments. It would be far wiser and more productive to be watchful for, and attentive to, any patterns that may develop in the kind of feedback that comes from many faculty over a significant period of time. If a chair finds himself or herself reacting in a highly sensitive way to each incident in which another offers evaluative comments (either favorable or unfavorable), perhaps the chair has psychic needs that require more or less feedback than the job has to offer.

While successful chairs do not grow elephant hides that protect them from all compliments or criticisms, they do develop a healthy perspective on feedback. They view feedback as just that—information they can use to help adjust their own behavior or to remedy conditions that need to be altered. Evaluation is viewed as diagnostic or “formative” in the sense that it provides a starting point for change and for the further development of one’s skills and performance.

Negative feedback is inevitable in any administrative position. All chairs receive criticism; none escapes it unless serving a very short term. Following the rule of thumb that the source should be considered in interpreting what negative feedback means, the chair should not ignore the criticism but rather try to understand the message. As often as not, negative feedback means that a chair has in fact gotten his or her point across—say perhaps that some sort of change is desired. Chairs who make a difference will inevitably meet with resistance and be forced to endure some criticism as a result. But they need not view that criticism as evidence that they are doing a poor job. Quite the contrary, they may view negative feedback as evidence that they are accomplishing exactly what they want to accomplish. Movement may be occurring in the desired direction, albeit movement with some resistance or friction along the way.

“Consider the source” does not mean that all negative feedback is benign. A chair may well find that negative evaluation is sufficiently widespread among key constituents, and sufficiently consistent in its content, to warrant careful attention. It may be a message to institute changes in one’s own style or agenda. Is the chair pushing too hard on a certain issue on which change is unlikely? Are faculty upset about not being consulted? Is the dean unhappy about lax supervision of staff? Are these things that a chair can do something about? If not, the chair may be in a situation in which he or she cannot hope to be effective. But it is always constructive to look at negative feedback as information one can put to use for the purposes of making needed change. Sometimes that change is in one’s own behavior; sometimes it is in other factors.

Just as negative feedback may have two sides, so may positive feedback have connotations that are not unconditionally good. Chairs who spend most of their time and energy “stroking” others and meeting others’ needs may be very popular. But they are not always addressing the tough problems a department may need to confront. If a department faces clear and objective problems, a chair is obliged to deal with these in a realistic way, and to accept a certain amount of criticism and discomfort in the process. A chair who pursues the path of least resistance in order to achieve personal popularity can do great damage to an impaired department that desperately needs leadership.

Again, the chair is well advised to consider the source of unconditional positive feedback or evaluation. If it comes from people who have good reason to criticize the chair, and if it acknowledges specific accomplishments, positive feedback can be extraordinarily gratifying. If on the other hand, it is unconditional and more personal, of the “hail fellow” variety, the chair might question whether there is real substance behind it. Just being a good-natured and vaguely popular person is hardly an indicator of effective performance by the chair.

Chairs may get a good deal of random feedback on their performance, but neither systematic nor valid feedback. New chairs should have an agreement with the dean about what kind of evaluation will be conducted and about how the information from such evaluation will be communicated and used. It is important for the chair to secure regular and dependable feedback above and beyond a ritual, year-end conference with the dean. Although such a conference is important (usually it is required), the occasion may become ritualistic and perfunctory. A year is too long a time to wait for feedback. The chair will be performing in a vacuum, and may be unable to make timely adjustments in either style or substance as required.

The chair who fails to get timely feedback will, often unconsciously, seek out cues. Sometimes a chair fishes for compliments from colleagues, or in the heat of immediate events becomes overly sensitive to both positive and negative comments. Without a more systematic and reliable source of information, the chair may be at the mercy of his or her own sensitivities as well as that of the idiosyncrasies of a few faculty who express themselves freely on any and all occasions.

Open lines of communication with the dean, including regular monthly conferences, would be helpful if they can be arranged. Likewise, departments often have a faculty advisory or executive committee that could serve as a useful sounding board for chairs to rely upon. Such a standing body of faculty might be a particularly good source of feedback. Occasionally a chair may be fortunate to have a trusted confidant among the most senior and experienced faculty. Such a person may be able to serve as an informal mentor. He or she may be familiar with the department’s history and with the way in which chairs have typically succeeded or failed in dealing with important and persistent problems. A chair would be fortunate indeed if this kind of relationship could be cultivated to the point where the faculty person would feel free to provide candid feedback. Such a relationship should of course, be discreet, and the chair would want to take care that the mentor not be perceived as such—and certainly that he or she would not be seen as having unusual access to, or influence upon, decisions and resource allocation.

Chairs obviously walk a very fine line between satisfying the dean and satisfying the faculty. In the end, chairs must decide to do what they consider best for their departments. It is the department’s interest—and not the faculty’s or the dean’s—that they are supposed to represent.

In summary then, a chair’s career will be marked by both positive and negative evaluation. The challenge to the chair is to treat all such information as useful feedback with which to work in charting the course of future decisions and actions. Chairs who are sensitive to what is going on around them will be able to adjust and carry on. Chairs who do not listen carefully to what significant others have to say will ultimately serve the department poorly. Evaluation is nothing more than the process by which others communicate with the chair about how well important messages are being received and acted upon. Chairs should welcome good and frequent feedback as a source of information about how they can do their jobs better.

**Questions**

1. Are department chairs at your institution formally evaluated by their faculty members on a regular basis? Do you think they should be?

2. When you became chair, what did your dean tell you about the problems of the department and what he or she would expect of you as the chair?

3. To what extent was the dean’s overview of the department accurate?

4. To what extent does the dean formally evaluate your performance as a chair? Discuss with you your strengths and weaknesses as a chair?

5. To what extent does he or she give suggestions and advice as to how you might solve some of the department’s problems? Or move the department forward?

6. Is there a colleague in or out of your department that you can turn to for feedback and support?

7. What qualities do you think an effective chair should possess?