

Beyond the Department: Building Effective Relationships with Deans, Provosts, and Presidents

M. Duane Nellis¹ and JW Harrington²

Introduction

As the chair or head of an academic department, you'll spend most of your time working directly with your faculty colleagues and administrative staff. We hope you will also keep time for your students, the department's students overall, and alumni and friends outside the department. Your communication and presence is important in their understanding of events and trends in the department, discipline, and college or university.

However, another set of external relationships is key to the success of you and your unit: relationships with those who directly control the bulk of the resources you need; from faculty positions and teaching assistantships to operating funds and new infrastructure. As you take on the job, you need to know who these people are:

- the dean of your college?
- the associate dean for your sub-collegiate division, or an associate dean with a portfolio that covers infrastructure or research-grant matching?
- the provost?
- a vice president?

This brief paper is about developing and maintaining good, honest relationships with those entities outside the department. But before you can build those relationships, you need to know with whom you need to build them! In part too, you need to understand the university or college environment within which this relationship occurs. For example, if your campus is unionized, that might dictate the types of interaction and decision-making environment between the department head/chair and the dean or other administrator. If you are at a research university versus a four-year liberal arts college, the types of interactions and expectations may differ as well.

What are your responsibilities and authority with respect to your institution and relative to these actors within and outside your department? The most important point in our introduction is that a new chair should immediately (preferably, before accepting the position) clarify her/his roles and authority with respect to the faculty, staff, and students and with respect to the dean and upper administration. In a bureaucracy, particular issues or decisions fall to the incumbents in specific positions. More accurately, a specific person or body makes the key recommendation based on a substantive review of information. *Before* the decision, there may be a tradition or requirement to *consult* with others. *After* the key recommendation, there will be procedural *review and approvals* by others (e.g., the Board of Trustees or Regents usually approves faculty appointments and promotions, but usually acts on the key recommendation of others).

¹ Provost and Senior Vice President and Professor of Geography, Kansas State University

² Professor of Geography and past Department Chair, University of Washington

But our question here is who makes the key decisions? In your department and college, who has the major substantive say in determining:

- short-term faculty hiring?
- long-term faculty hiring?
- administrative staff hiring?
- faculty promotions?
- faculty and staff salary adjustments?
- faculty teaching assignments?
- course offerings?³
- resource reallocation from one budget area to another?
- the tenure of the chair's position?

Is it the department faculty as a whole? The tenured faculty? An executive committee? The department chair or head? The dean? A college-wide committee? Understanding these protocols will go a long way toward building effective relationships with colleagues inside the department and with higher administrators: you want to make the decisions you're expected to make, and recognize when your input is needed instead of your decision!

Styles and Frames

Despite the questions raised above about who has what roles and authority, the dean of your college is likely to be in the single most important position to affect your department. In the interest of establishing your role as chair and your relationship with the dean, you as a new or potential chair should have a frank discussion with the dean about the key, general goals for your term in office. You need to share your key proposals with the dean, and hear his or her sense of the areas in which the department needs to maintain a positive status quo versus make major changes: student numbers, graduation rates, research grants, collegiality, research publications. You probably know which areas need what sort of attention, but the two of you can work together much more effectively if you come to an agreement. Besides, one benefit of having deans is their careful observation of *several* departments over some period of time: a good and experienced dean has a valuable perspective for your diagnosis of your own department.

During this important meeting, you should ask questions about the dean's preferred modes of interaction: channels ("Just call up any time" versus "Generally you should contact the associate dean in the relevant area"), frequency, and medium (one dean's inability to catch up with e-mail may be matched by another's dislike of unplanned phone calls). Try to honor these preferences, unless they clearly reduce your own effectiveness (Lees 2006).

You should also look for implicit cues, and ask others, about the dean's mode and motivation for decision making. Tucker (1993, 484-6) suggests four decanal archetypes – the ambitious "tyro," the senior "statesman," the risen-through-the-ranks "manager," and the

³ We'll explicitly presume that the full-time faculty all have a say in the long-term curriculum – what new courses are developed and what courses are required for a given degree. But the chair may or may not be able to determine which courses are to be taught in a given term or year.

insecure “tyrant.” Perhaps more useful than typecasting your dean is to be very curious whether your dean, and relevant associate deans and vice provosts (for research, undergraduate education, graduate programs) welcome exciting new ideas and support unusual opportunities, respond best to detailed proposals that follow an established format, or need to see their favorite phrases and concepts at the core of every request. You’ll want to learn how to obtain the resources your department needs within the formats and framing that appeal to the dean or others. Your department’s needs come first, but you cannot get resources or permissions from others by ignoring their preferences and frames of reference⁴ (Lees 2006, 134-5).

In addition to the general use of that phrase “frames of reference,” we are referring to the powerful way in which Bolman and Deal (2003) illustrate four distinct and complementary frames through which we can view organizations – like our departments and colleges:

1. The **structural frame** sees an organization as a set of roles, responsibilities, and reporting relationships. Do individuals have the authority, information, and incentives needed to complete their tasks effectively? Do committees have clear charges, with the agreement of the faculty?
2. The **human resources frame** sees the same organization primarily as a group of human beings who share motivations of being valued and of finding satisfaction in their work and in the rest of their lives. Is someone being uncooperative because he feels slighted by someone else’s promotion or even by an offhand remark at a meeting?
3. The **political frame** recognizes that even small changes in an organization require that key decision makers *and* other influential entities back the change. This frame also recognizes that resource allocations are political decisions. How can an individual garner and maintain a role as or in a powerful entity?
4. The **symbolic frame** is aware that every group (the department, the college, the faculty) operates on the basis of shared expectations and norms, which are often expressed in and shaped by stories and symbols – of quality, innovativeness, value, or of decline, fear of change, and marginalization. What stories do we believe about ourselves, and what stories about us do others (e.g., the dean) carry around? What information, symbols, and stories will change negative expectations to positive ones?

Unlike so many organization theories that set up two or four alternatives and then explain that they are all wrong or that only one is accurate, Bolman and Deal emphasize that all four frames are valuable. A good leader views any important situation through all four frames, identifies

⁴ An associate dean once relayed these two stories to one of the authors, when he was a department chair:

- A few weeks before, a new department chair asked her at their first meeting in his new role: “Do I need to argue and send angry e-mails to get resources for my department? That’s what my faculty want me to do, and I’ll do it if that’s what other chairs do to get resources.” She replied that in the years they’d known each other, she hoped that she’d made it clear that she responds to reason and some grace better than to yelling and anger. He was very relieved.
- When the author asked her about a resource matter about which he’d sent an e-mail two weeks before, she replied that she got many such requests, some of which she knew reflected a chair’s following through on a noncommittal response to a faculty colleague “I’ll ask the dean about that.” Therefore, she waited to see how many times the chair asked about the matter.

In other words, anger and raised voices seldom work, but the chair must make his priorities clear to the Dean!

appropriate actions suggestions by each frame, and takes the actions that seem most warranted from her/his knowledge of the situation.

As you and your dean carry out a discussion (or so often these days, a virtual discussion via e-mail), watch for clues of his framing. Your reasoned arguments may have more effect if you can diagnose (to yourself) that one of you has been emphasizing only one frame, and that you might make use of additional frames. In many cases, deans see their major role as allocative, their decisions motivated by efficient, equitable distribution among departments. As chair, you may need to remind your dean of the human-resource or symbolic importance of your request or of a policy modification. Sometimes a small amount of flexibility can go a long way toward making someone feel appreciated or reinforcing a department goal or success.

The symbolic frame is especially important in your dealing with external forces, like your dean, upper administration, boards of trustees, and the public. They may not know or care about your successful restructuring of the curriculum, your strides in gaining more careful listening at department meetings, or that as a small department you have not been able to get the resources you need. But busy administrators and external laypeople may respond to your department's persistent stories of public service, of student scholarship, of the value in understanding places before we try to improve or affect them.

Principles of Effective Leadership Communication

Building on our discussion of styles of interaction is the need for some reflection on patterns of effective leadership communication. In part, these patterns reflect qualities of effective leadership in the context of most professional interactions and not limited to communications with deans and provosts. Indeed as we think about leadership communication, what defines outstanding organizations is effective leadership demonstrated by shared responsibilities for moving a unit, department, college, or university forward. The more individuals and units work toward a concept of collective responsibilities for constructive dialogue, the more likely for overall individual and organizational success. The role of individuals and the values they expose cannot be over-emphasized relative to effective leadership communication. Knowing ourselves better is critical as we aim to work with others to accomplish shared goals and objectives. Margaret Wheatley's succinct comment underscores the importance of understanding the complex dimensions involved in working with people. She said, "Power in organizations is the capacity generated by relationships" (Wheatley 1992, 38-9).

Through various readings and during many years of administrative experience, we have reflected a great deal about leadership and what constitutes effective leadership communications, we feel there are ten points that have served us well (Nellis 2006). To be effective in leadership communication, one must endeavor to:

- have a vision
- focus on positives
- treat others with respect
- maintain integrity
- be a good listener
- work in multi-dimensional ways to communicate
- be decisive
- lead by example
- maintain a genuine, caring attitude toward others, and
- be strategic in thinking and actions

Colleagues, deans, and provosts appreciate interaction with individuals who have goals and priorities, and can relate these goals and priorities to a vision for where their careers are headed. Communicating positives, not always negatives, also creates a more receptive attitude toward working with you on those issues for which you do need help. Even if you are met with a barrage of negativity, the best response is generally positive, with information. For example, in a meeting about something else entirely, your dean says pointedly “Your enrollments per faculty FTE are down.” If this is true, it should not be a surprise to you. A positive response might be “Our two new hires have been working with me and other colleagues to revise our course offerings. We hope to use a new lower-division course to attract more students into our suite of upper-division courses.” Or “What figures were you reviewing? That could reflect Judy’s teaching reduction last year, when she suddenly accepted the assistant provost role; we couldn’t cover all of her courses that next semester. She’s enjoying the new role, and we’ve hired a part-time person for this entire year.” Such responses are more likely to turn the conversation around than “That’s ridiculous. The College has never tracked our faculty FTE correctly.”

Everyone notices how you do or do not respect individuals, no matter their position in a unit or organization. How you treat the dean and provost’s staff is just as important to how you treat the administrator. Demonstrating a genuine attitude of caring about the general welfare of people with which you professionally interact also goes a long way toward an effective communication environment. Your communication must also demonstrate your integrity to the facts. Once your integrity is compromised, it is hard to restore what you have lost.

Effective communication has several attributes. The most important is your over-arching or “take-away” message – which often has some relationship to the department’s long-term vision. Oral and written administrative communication, unlike much academic writing, should *begin* and end with a pithy conclusion. A second attribute of effective communication is cogent data or information to support your request or argument. The third attribute is active listening. Having really heard the key goals of your dean and provost will help you form your requests in ways that support their goals. Effective communication is repeated, sometimes in different media (telephone, e-mail, memos, meetings – each has different strengths in setting a tone, providing detail, and hearing others’ goals). Getting one’s message through may require

repeated and multi-faceted delivery to ensure a constructive point is made, without crossing the barrier of irritation.

Communicating strategic thinking into action planning is crucial. Many individuals have vision or goals but lack the operational plans to carry them out effectively. When such operational plans are effectively communicated, deans and provosts often want to help in bringing such plans toward reality.

Effective communication must not occur only between dean and chair. Deans expect that chairs will transmit important information (about goals, policies, and programs) to faculty, staff, and (at times) students in their departments (Warren 1990).

Establishing and Maintaining Positive Relations with your Dean and Provost

The ten points mentioned in the previous section form the framework for a discussion on characteristics of positive relations with deans and provosts. In working with a dean or provost, a department head needs to realize that the dean or provost generally wants the same thing – a positive working relationship with an expectation that the department is strongly committed toward the college's and university's mission (Leaming 1998).

At the same time, just like department chairs, deans have many different approaches and ambitions related to their positions, and department chairs will need to be sensitive to these diverse styles as they work on building an effective relationship (Tucker 1993). At one extreme are deans who are highly ambitious, anxious to use the deanship as a stepping stone to something greater, with limited institutional commitment. At the other extreme are those deans who are more dictatorial, with a high need to control department chairs or heads. Most deans, though, balance the need for them to manage a complex college while engaging the faculty and department heads in a collective vision for moving the college forward consistent with the university's goals and mission.

The interaction between department chairs and provosts/vice presidents will vary tremendously from one university to another, although many provosts/vice presidents have regular interactions with department chairs, especially in the context of the broader university's goals, initiatives, and policies and procedures. Although the frequency and depth of discussions between department chairs and provosts will not compare to interactions with deans, many of the same characteristics that apply toward a healthy relationship with the deans will also apply to such interactions with provosts. At the same time, many deans will expect direct communication with the provost's office to be coordinated through the dean.

So what are some of the key characteristics of positive relations with deans and provosts?

- 1) Deans and provosts expect department chairs to be strong advocates for their units, but such advocacy must be balanced with a sense of collegiality, and sensitivity to the

broader college and university goals and priorities⁵. In this context, it is essential for department chairs to openly communicate the dean's and provost's priorities to the department faculty and staff, creating a sense of partnership with the college and university. For example, most colleges and universities are putting renewed emphasis on outcomes based learning and the development of appropriate assessment instruments. Department chairs who embrace these efforts and effectively communicate such efforts to faculty will put such units out front with respect to deans and provosts. It is also helpful in this context (as problems arise) that one tries to understand the role of university provost or college dean and the challenges they face.

- 2) Being a self-directed problem-solver creates a positive work relationship with deans and provosts. This doesn't mean that serious problems can't be brought forward to a dean or provost, but it is best when problems can be solved at the department level.
- 3) However, the dean or provost expects to be informed of any major issue that might eventually matriculate to their offices or issues that might bring media attention (Tucker 1993). Deans and provosts do not like to be surprised (Lees 2006, 129). Cases that involve inappropriate faculty-student relations; situations that involve misuse of university resources; or issues that have external legal implications are general examples of need-to-know issues.
- 4) Deans and provosts respect department chairs who take responsibility for their decisions. Sometimes, department chairs will use the dean or provost as a way to avoid taking responsibility for decision they may have made. Faculty and staff (as well as deans) will generally respect department chairs or heads more if they do not abrogate or pass on major decision-making responsibility. Too often, department heads or chairs want to pass blame for resource decisions or personnel issues to someone outside the department, where appropriate acceptance of responsibility is more justified and in the long-run, more advantageous to the department's success.
- 5) Integrity is essential to developing a positive role with deans and provosts. Such honesty will go a long way in establishing constructive dialogue with all administrators in a university or college setting. Directly related to integrity is a commitment from a department chair to not talk behind a dean's or provost's back. Deans and provosts expect department heads to be 'team' members who are willing to talk through issues that they may have with other administrators through private meetings.
- 6) Positive relations with deans and provosts are reinforced when department heads effectively address their management responsibilities associated with meeting deadlines,

⁵ Lees [2006: 135] provides an example: "some space becomes available in a school where space is a very limiting factor. A chair could use that space to consolidate department faculty, some of whom are in the building next door. This is certainly a good idea for the benefit of that faculty community. However, another chair suggests that the space be used to create an instrument center to house equipment used by faculty members in several departments. Further, the centralization of the equipment can also be used to attract new faculty without having to duplicate some of the items. Here the chair sets aside limited department advantage for the higher impact potential of the instrument center. Understanding the larger picture, being astute about appealing to greater needs, and knowing when to bow out are all attributes chairs might think about in their dealings with the dean."

staying within their budgets, and following appropriate university and college policies and procedures. For example, personnel issues are more seriously complicated and sometimes compromised when appropriate policies and procedures at universities and colleges are not followed. This is particularly true in cases of promotion and tenure. Everyone makes an occasional mistake, and experienced deans recognize that. However, repeatedly late paperwork, inaccurate reporting, or overspent budgets will definitely undermine the trust that a dean has to have with a department chair (Lees 2006, 128).

- 7) Keep the dean and provost informed. Ensure that the dean is aware of major new developments in the department – a major new research grant, a major award for a faculty member or student, or new curricular initiatives.

Regular meetings with your dean can be very advantageous for keeping the dean informed about major developments in your department as well as to discuss any potential significant issues (Tucker 1993). The frequency of such meetings will vary depending on the dean's administrative approach and style, but such direct meetings can be invaluable in building a positive relationship with the dean. In contrast, some department heads do not necessarily regularly meet with deans unless there are key initiatives involving the dean or substantial issues (e.g. concerns about an inappropriate action of a faculty member relative to a student, or a significant financial issue that may require additional resources from the dean).

It is also best for your dean or provost to limit the extent of certain types of sensitive communication via e-mail. Electronic communication via e-mail has become more and more a part of our daily academic lives. Unfortunately, at times, people tend to use e-mail in ways where messages can be misinterpreted or misguided when dealing with sensitive issues. Department chairs should be very careful to use e-mail in ways that inform without getting into details of opinions on confidential personnel decisions. For example, e-mail from a department head to his dean might include details on a faculty member's problematic behavior, based on second hand information. That message is a retrievable, written document that may have implications in any legal challenge or grievance process. A better or more appropriate approach might be a face-to-face meeting between the dean and the department head to discuss all dimensions of the situation.

The Big Picture

With limited public resources for higher education, departments at some universities are being expected to take a more active role in developing relationships with alumni and corporate sponsors (Lees 2006). Such activities should be carefully coordinated with the college and university to avoid cultivation conflicts and maximize potential donor relations. A sensitivity to donor relations in the context of your dean and provost can be viewed very positively by the affected administrator.

Many colleges and universities are also committed to enhancing diversity and accessibility. Where department heads develop effective strategies that enhance diversity, accessibility, and retention among students, and diversity and retention among faculty, deans and provosts will also view this very positively.

Being aware of developing national higher education issues can place your department in a more positive light as well. How these issues impact your department or how your department is helping the college and institution address these challenges can position your department to be out front with themes such as being more engaged, more accountable, and helping the college to be more entrepreneurial. For example, an on-line geospatial information system certificate program might respond to a national trend for more scientists needed in this area, while also generating more revenue for the geography department. Another example might be designing courses, programs, or study-abroad opportunities to address the widely recognized need for greater understanding of global issues and interactions. If the dean or provost understands the value of implementing a new track in your department and the college, she may be willing to invest revenues to help bring this new track to reality.

The dean and provost also have responsibilities in their relationship with department chairs (Warren 1990). Chairs cannot share a sense of the college's or university's overall goals and progress if chairs have no role in defining goals, or if information about progress is not shared clearly. While a single chair cannot force openness on a dean or provost, it is reasonable to expect some open discussions of strategy and some comparative information across departments.

Overall, serving as a department head or chair can be challenging yet highly rewarding. In summary, as has been illustrated in this resource chapter, creating a positive relationship with a dean or provost is based on use of common sense as well as a commitment to be true to oneself, recognizing that yesterday's solutions may not be applicable to tomorrow's problems.

References

- Bolman, Lee G. and Deal, Terrrence E. 2003. *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 3rd edition. San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Leaming, Deryl R. 1998. *Academic Leadership*. Boston, MA: Anker Publishing.
- Lees, N. Douglas. 2006. Working with the dean and other administrators. In *Chairing Academic Departments: Traditional and Emerging Expectations*, 124-139. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.
- Lucas, A. 1994. *Strengthening Departmental Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Nellis, M. Duane. 2006. "Effective Leadership." Coffman Leadership Institute Keynote Address: Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS.
- Tucker, Allan. 1993. *Chairing the Academic Department*. Phoenix, AZ: Onyx Press, for the American Council on Education.
- Warren, Charles O. 1990. Chairperson and dean: the essential partnership. In *Enhancing Departmental Leadership: The Roles of the Chairperson*, eds. John B. Bennett and David J. Figuli, 30-35. New York: Macmillan, for the American Council on Education.
- Wheatley, Margaret. 1992. *Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organizations from an Orderly Universe*. San Francisco, CA: Barrett-Koehler Publishers.

Other Related Resources

- Creswell, J. W., D. Wheeler, A. Seagren, N. Egly, and K. Beyer. 1990. *The Academic Chairperson's Handbook*. Lincoln, NE: The University of Nebraska Press.
- McDaniel, Thomas R. *Dean's Dialogue: A Compilation of Articles Related to Deaning*. In *Academic Leader 2000-2006*. Madison, WI: Magna Publications.
- Nellis, M. Duane, Janice Monk, and Susan Cutter. 2004. *Presidential Musings from the Meridian*. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press.
- Wulff, Donald and Ann Austin. 2004. *Paths to the Professoriate*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.