

Conflict management for Department Chairs

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Agenda

- Introductions
- Brown Bag Objectives
- The Unique Nature of Academic Conflict
- Prevention and Intervention Strategies
- Scripting and Documentation
- Principles in action
- Review of Resources

Introductions

- ❖ Your name
- ❖ Department/Program
- ❖ Types of faculty conflict you've encountered or worry about encountering

Brown Bag Objectives

- Provide strategies to proactively address issues
- Creating a plan
- Practice intervention through a case scenario
- Resource support for department chairs in managing conflict

Unique Factors in Academia that impact conflict management

- Faculty autonomy & independence
- Team-oriented decision-making on Department issues/changes
- Pre-tenure vs. post-tenure dynamics
- Lengthy Faculty careers
- Rotational nature of leadership
- Differing philosophies
- Competition for limited resources within the College or discipline
- Other factors?

Source: Mending the Cracks in the Ivory Tower: Strategies for Conflict Management in Higher Education by Cynthia Berryman-Fink

Prevention Strategies

- Create multiple avenues for feedback
- Convene meetings that allow for faculty input with ground rules developed by the faculty, explore problems before meetings
- Encourage all faculty to engage in discussing *how* we address conflict here? What are the boundaries?
- Encourage parties to engage with each other directly
- Inquire if you sense something is wrong

Prevention Scenario

A junior faculty member, Paul, has come to you as chair to express concerns that some tenured faculty are unreasonable in their review of junior faculty in the merit process based on expansive, offhand comments he has heard colleagues make in reference to the caliber of his peers. He cites one specific comment by a senior faculty member, "these teaching evaluations are unacceptable" in reference to his colleague Jamila James. Paul is aware that this same senior faculty designed one of the courses in question and resisted Jamila's efforts to modify and update the course. Paul was reluctant to speak up in defense of Jamila. Paul is up for review soon himself and is very concerned that a similarly superficial review may jeopardize his success in the department.

Intervention Strategies

- Plan and, if necessary, buy time
- Engage instead of avoiding
- Dispel misperceptions
- Gain better understanding of needs/expectations/interests
- Interrupt problem interactions
- Leverage your knowledge of the individuals in conflict to benefit resolution
- Intervene if you observe dysfunctional conflict

Planning the Dialogue

- Consider your approach
 - what do you want to say
 - what are the goals of the dialogue
 - what points must be covered
 - should there be a third party present?
- Consult with former chair, Academic Affairs & Dean's Office
- Consider possible solutions and have that ready, but be open to changing direction depending on what you learn

The Discussion

- Help the individual frame their main points
- Remind them to be open and listen
- Dispel misperceptions, gain better understanding of concerns
- Avoid being “sworn to secrecy”
- Work to come to practical solutions with action items

Follow-up

- Consider an appropriate time to check in, typically requires more than one check-in
- Did action items occur?
- Any consequences that need to be managed (for others in the department)

Scripting and Documentation

Purpose

Scripting Benefits

1. Stays on track
2. Provides a process
3. Promotes consistency with future issues

Document - to confirm what was discussed

1. To yourself (note to file)
2. Back to the individual
3. Don't keep unnecessary documents (drafts, your rough notes, etc.)

Conflict Scenario

- Professor Jones is a senior faculty member within the department. Three years ago she was awarded a renewable \$1.1 MIL NIH grant and she has been prolific in her publication record. Her lab employs eight Postdocs and 14 PhD students.
- Recently an anonymous grad student complaint was made alleging that Professor Jones has a volatile temper, particularly when grad students make mistakes in her lab. She reportedly said to a grad student, “I’d call you an imbecile but I’m pretty sure you’re too stupid to know what that means.” The complaint alleges demeaning comments are a common occurrence in the lab and this has made lab members fearful of reporting errors or seeking her guidance. It was also reported that Prof. Jones requires graduate students to submit their work for publication as a condition of receiving their PhD’s.

Action Planning

What discussions, steps and actions should be considered in response to this complaint?

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Resources

Academic Affairs and your Dean's Office are great places to start - they may be familiar with the issue and have insights/strategies to address the problem

Use your resources:

- To help deal with conflict early to reduce potential for escalation
- To ensure consistency in addressing issues and ensure support of the approach
- As a good starting point; conflict stems from a lot of different situations, your resources list helps eliminate the need to pinpoint the best place to start

Questions & Evaluations