

Conflict Management: Managing Difficult Conversations

Presented by:

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New Chairs 2 Day Workshop

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Imagine this...

Prof. X, a senior faculty member in your department, is highly productive and is internationally recognized as an expert in their field.

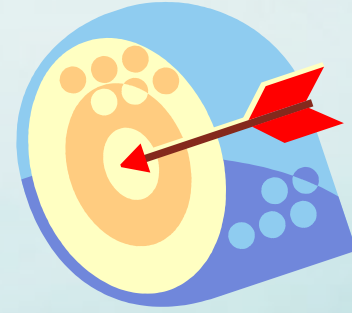
Two junior faculty members come together to your office and tell you that they are very concerned about the way Professor X treats them. They say that at meetings, Prof. X talks over them and often makes snide remarks about them and their work. They also say that they have heard from Prof. X's graduate students that Prof. X is "quite a bully" with them, too.

Interestingly, you recently had a visit from several of Professor X's graduate students, who reported that Professor X was "abusive," "intimidating," and "very slow" to provide feedback on their work, which was compromising their ability to progress.

You have observed Prof. X interrupt and talk over other faculty at meetings, and you've heard the remarks that the junior faculty describe.

What would you do?

Goals



- Provide a “step approach” to managing conflict
- Review resources and when to consult
- Recognize what’s unique about conflict management in an academic setting

When workplace conflicts aren't managed. . .

- They can escalate
- People get distracted from work
- Morale suffers
- Physical effects - stress
- Can affect life outside of work
- Formal grievances, lawsuits
- People leave



What's special about managing conflicts in academia?

- Rotational nature of leadership
- Lengthy faculty careers
- Faculty autonomy & independence
- Team-oriented decision-making on department issues/changes
- Pre-tenure vs. post-tenure dynamics
- 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

Why is this work important?

- Demonstrates your responsiveness as a chair
- Sets environmental tone
- Builds morale
- Prevents issues from escalating
- Reduces formal complaints and grievances
- Minimizes “conflict creep”



An ounce of prevention...

- “Living the Principles of Community” eCourse
- Use faculty meetings to set climate and allow for input & feedback.
- Foster discussions regarding how, as a department and interpersonally, issues are addressed
- Follow through and follow up consistently
- Model effective behavior and engagement

Steps to managing conflict

1. Consult



2. Act



3. Document



Managing conflict isn't BAD
When you remember C.A.D.

Consult

Act

Document

CONSULT: Resources

Your Dean's Office is a great place to start – they may be familiar with the issue(s) and have insights/strategies to address the problem.

Use Resources (*see Resource List*):

- To help deal with conflict early to reduce potential for escalation
- As a place to start; you don't have to be the "expert".
- If you aren't getting anywhere or could use the extra help
- If issues are larger than you can handle or have potential repercussions, policy implications, etc.
- To share any liability by keeping others with a need to know in the loop

CONSULT: Academic Affairs

- We'll help you assess whether policy issues are involved (mandated reporting, etc.)
- We can check our records for any history
- We'll help you plan your conversation:
 - Talking points to help you
 - keep discussion on track
 - cover the important issues
 - document the conversation appropriately
 - develop consistency in your approach to future issues
 - Approach (including timing, location, others)
- We'll help identify resources to assist you and the parties involved

ACT

- Fight the temptation to avoid or accommodate
- Encourage parties to engage with each other as appropriate, especially very early in a conflict
- Review your talking points, breathe deeply, and conduct your conversation

What would you do if ...?

- You hear grad students talking about your newest faculty member going out drinking with them
 - You notice irregularities in a faculty member's travel expense report?
 - Someone in the department got angry in a laboratory, and threw *something* across the room; now members of the lab, and those in surrounding labs, and within the department, are scared of this person.
1. *What's the first thing you need to do in this situation?*
 2. *Does this lend itself to a conversation with you/others, or is there something more that would need to be done?*

DOCUMENT

As a new chair, it's important to check in with the outgoing chair for briefing on any pending or ongoing department issues for an effective transition.

- Document for yourself along the way, as needed (note to file)
- Document the conversation back to the individual(s) in the form of a letter to them – we will review this before you send it
- Don't keep unnecessary documentation in your file
- If this has happened before, documenting may not be enough

Follow up

- How's the complainant/reporting person doing?
- If there were action items, did those occur?
- How's the workgroup/unit doing? Were there collateral effects that need to be addressed?



Points to Remember

- Setting the climate is key to prevention
- Planning makes a huge difference
- Always consider any policy implications
- Resources are here to help --you're not alone in managing these issues
- Dealing with conflict early increases the likelihood of successfully managing the conflict
- Document throughout, even if just for yourself
- A great primer/resource – ***Difficult Conversations – How to Discuss What Matters Most***

Department Chairs Bag Lunch – *Future Sessions*

Conflict Management
for Department Chairs

Thursday, February 28, 2019

AND

Wednesday, May 8, 2019

12:10-2:00 pm

203 Mrak Hall



Panel and Scenarios

