

## **Mind Reading 101: What Do Chief Academic Officers Want from Department Chairs?**

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Frequent readers of *The Department Chair* and other academic leadership publications are familiar with the metaphors for middle managers in academia. Known as the “glue,” the “shock-absorbers,” the “creamy filling,” department chairs need to be jugglers, magicians, miracle workers, and mind readers to do their jobs well. Because most chairs we have met are not trained magicians or mind readers, we thought it would be helpful to take some of the mystery out of the process and examine the question, “What do CAOs want from their department chairs?”

At a recent academic administrator conference in Washington, DC, we asked the attending CAOs to respond to the prompt, “Write down what you’ve always wanted to tell your deans and department chairs but would rather have us do for you?” We analyzed and synthesized the resulting 50 comments and collapsed them into the following six general categories:

- Demand excellence from your faculty members.
- Develop realistic budgets and budget requests.
- Collect data and make assessment a priority.
- Lead and solve problems instead of just being an advocate.
- Focus on institutional mission over departmental needs.
- Pay attention to personal passion and commitment.

We then ranked the frequency of the responses in each area and attempted to verify the results via informal conversations with CAO peers and by analyzing the intensity of the comments. These filters provided the following suggestive snapshot. Before reading ahead, you might want to conduct your own mind-reading experiment and rank these six categories by what you think the frequency of response would be. In other words, what do you think *your* CAO is most interested in having you focus your time and energy on?

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The actual frequency results from our sample are:

18—Lead and solve problems instead of just being an advocate.

9—Develop realistic budgets and budget requests.

7—Demand excellence from your faculty members.

7—Focus on institutional mission over departmental needs.

5—Pay attention to personal passion and commitment.

4—Collect data and make assessment a priority.

Comments abounded such as “Act like a leader!” and “If you see an issue, propose an alternative strategy or approach. Don’t just complain.” One CAO got so into the project that she wrote lengthy paragraphs describing her philosophy of personnel development. There was clearly a lot of passion exhibited throughout the survey regarding the need for leadership on the part of department chairs.

We took this information from CAOs to a group of 54 department chairs participating in a recent institute for deans and chairs. Without revealing the results from the CAOs, we asked the chairs to rank the items based on what they thought the CAOs would say. Interestingly, the results were different, with department chairs choosing “focus on institutional mission” and “budgets” as the clear top two. “Leadership and problem solving” fell in the middle of the pack.

So why the disparity in what the CAOs appeared to want and what the chairs themselves thought was being expected of them? The discussion at the institute focused on two likely causes for the CAO emphasis on leadership. First, CAOs, we surmised, mostly live in the world of “lead and solve problems,” so it would make sense that this group would want those reporting to them to share these concerns. Second, CAOs are typically very busy with lots of competing pressures of their own, so the more that chairs can “solve problems” and display leadership skills the less problems the CAO will have to worry about.

Although the chairs did not discuss their perception of “chairing” we wondered if antiquated perceptions of chair work also came into play. It is no secret that many chairs take the position out of duty or because it is “their turn.” In the past, chairs have been primarily budget managers who followed the dreams and plans of their administrators rather than dreaming and planning themselves. Leaming (2007) acknowledges that the responsibilities of today’s department chairs are rapidly expanding and that they “must see the ‘big picture’ while at the same time give meticulous attention to minute detail” (p. xv). In

short, today's chair must be both a leader with vision and people skills and a manager with an eagle eye to detail, an elephant's memory, and the patience of Job.

Examining what CAOs wanted from department chairs piqued our curiosity so we conducted a second mind-reading experiment to see how peers think their colleagues should be spending their time. Earning respect from ones peers is critical for working with committees, acquiring new faculty, increasing budgets, meeting approval for curriculum changes, and making your time at work more fulfilling and healthy. After culling through numerous articles and a half-dozen books by experts in the field, we adopted the following list of key "habits of highly effective department chairs":

- Develop well-articulated, concrete goals.
- Know and understand your colleagues and fellow administrators.
- Aspire to be a change agent.
- Appreciate and support good teaching, research, and service.
- Act honestly, forthrightly, and decently.
- Treat people fairly and evenhandedly.
- Build consensus via effective communication.

When we asked department chairs to respond to this list based on their own experiences and reading, they participated in a lively debate that resulted in a new "top three." The new number one response for being a successful department chair (which wasn't even on the original list) was: "Hire a good administrative assistant!" The second and third top consensus responses were: "They're all important, so find the balance that's right for you," and "As 'middle management' you must deal with so many different constituencies that it is the process of collaborative teamwork that matters most."

In other words, you can talk all you want about the right CAO "goals" and department chair "work," but if you don't have good people and good judgment, no amount of analysis and system building will ever make you a success as an academic administrator.

Chairs are indeed pulled in multiple directions because they are at the heart of what our institutions do. But many department chairs accept the position out of obligation and with the attitude that they are "serving their time." In the past, the chair position at many institutions has been a rotating one, leaving little motivation for chairs to envision and try to shape the future of their departments.

The results of our survey, our conversations with CAOs, our reading in the field, and our own preferences, however, all point toward the need for a new type of department chair. One who leads with passion and balance. The modern department chair is the lynchpin of the academic organization as it moves away from the mid-20th-century hierarchical model to the more free-form and flat 21st-century "knowledge worker" model. The call is less and less for chairs to serve as middle "managers" and more and more for chairs to think and respond as middle "leaders."

The paradigm shift to middle leaders for some of you may seem overwhelming; for others, exhilarating. Many chairs have always functioned as leaders, and frequently those who have gone on to higher positions look back at their academic careers and remark, "My best years were my chair years." Our hope for you is that your best years are your chair years as well.

*This article is modified from the keynote presentation by Dr. Ericson to the first annual Council for Christian Colleges and Universities Department Chair Institute, hosted by Dr. Mallard and Gordon College.*

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