Earlier this year, I entered the position of department chair well prepared, seasoned, well received, and ready to perform, thanks to a variety of factors such as timing, departmental support, campus recognition, rich mentoring, a lengthy transition, and leadership workshops.

First, as in most organizational changes, good timing matters. And timing surely affects a new department chair and his or her department. After a dozen years at my university, I was ripe to ascend to lead the department. Already tenured and recently promoted to full professor, my timing was ideal. And over the past five years, I held director roles in my department, gaining experience and earning the respect of my colleagues in the department and college. In fact, most of my colleagues assumed for years that I would become the next chair.

Second, in my position as an internal candidate, I’ve enjoyed the broad support of my colleagues, as well as the support of those in our higher administration. During my interview process, I felt affirmed by the search committee, my colleagues, the dean, provost, and president. While there were some mildly awkward moments in interviewing with the colleagues I know so well, I already know and care deeply about my faculty, staff, and students. The learning curve for me has been so much more manageable as an internal candidate and now chair who was promoted from within.

Third, I enjoyed broad and positive recognition on campus when I received the university-wide Outstanding Professor Award the year before becoming chair. In essence, I experienced a year of celebration for my own professorial achievements immediately before my promotion. For instance, I spoke at commencement and convocation to thousands of my colleagues and community members. Additionally, before receiving the award, I served as a leader in the faculty senate, graduate council, curriculum committee, and countless other roles, which allowed me to serve and lead with hundreds outside of my own academic department. In short, I have gained significant social capital here.

Fourth, over my tenure at the university, I have been richly mentored by the four past department chairs in my department. Through their own unique styles, I learned from each of their experiences, successes, and challenges. In a professional way, they each “raised” me into administrative leadership. I recall being told by all of them that I would make an excellent chair and administrator. These men empowered me to seek out recommended opportunities and they, in part, shaped me.

Fifth, after being selected in December 2007, I had ample time to plan before beginning my new role on July 1. During that time, my colleagues and I had an opportunity to conduct a three-month long SWOT
(strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and weaknesses) analysis of our department, allowing us to reflect on the past and plan for the future. As such, we worked to create a new leadership structure in our department, revamping our programs and hierarchies with my term in mind. While change of any kind is time-consuming and sometimes challenging, this analysis and resulting changes have been highly productive, cost-effective, and healthy. This process also allowed me to select colleagues to serve with me on my new departmental team. The seven-month transition also enabled the former chair and me to regularly meet and adequately discuss the specific duties of department chair.

Lastly, during the year before assuming the role of chair, I attended an ACE Chairing the Academic Department workshop, which provided helpful training and development, along with encouragement and a vast network of other department leaders. Unlike when I’ve attended discipline-specific academic conference programs on departmental leadership, I particularly enjoyed meeting and learning from peers in various disciplines and academic institutions of all sizes and types. The ACE Fellows who attended the workshop and the selected workshop speakers offered encouragement, mentoring, and ideas of change and improvement in our individual roles and departments.

Altogether, I cannot imagine how I could have entered my new role with greater advantage.

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