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Voices of Women in the Field: The Top 10 Things We Learned about Being a Department Chair*

Lana Danielson
University of Nebraska at Omaha, ldanielson@mail.unomaha.edu

Laura Schulte
University of Nebraska at Omaha, lschulte@mail.unomaha.edu

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Lana Danielson and Laura Schulte

This article documents the top 10 things we learned in our transition from being a faculty member to becoming a department chair. We were recruited as department chairs in the same year and quickly recognized each other as administrative colleagues. During our "internship" in the chair position we frequently identified lessons we were learning, jokingly adding them to our "Top 10" list. What follows is our refined list of advice we would share with other new chairs.

1. Find a trusted friend.

Trust has been defined as the "belief that those on whom we depend will meet our expectations of them" (Shaw, 1997, p. 21). In our first year as chairs we came to trust one another. This trust developed gradually as a result of repeated interactions with and observations of each other. During our weekly lunch meetings we felt comfortable discussing issues that concerned us and sharing our personal feelings about them. We recognized in each other the integrity that guided these confidences. We came to trust one another because we respected each other's competence, believed the other would follow through on commitments, and felt we had a colleague who cared and was concerned for our well being (Noddings, 1986; Schindler & Thomas, 1993; Shaw, 1997). Having a colleague who listened, who knew when to provide sound advice and when to let us discover our own answer, was an important key to our growth as administrators.

2. Give yourself permission to learn.

The first year of the chair position is filled with new responsibilities for budgeting, scheduling, hiring, negotiating, and evaluating. Some tasks had clearly defined procedures while others left considerable ambiguity about how to proceed. We needed to give ourselves permission to "learn the ropes" as well as the culture of the administrative organization (Louis, 1980). Because we were new chairs at the same time, we compared procedural understandings with one another and together figured out when to ask for help. We often reminded each other that the learning curve was great

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About the Authors

Lana Danielson is an Associate Professor and chair of Teacher Education at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Her research interests include reflective decision-making and mentoring. Email: *ldanielson@mail.unomaha.edu.*

Laura Schulte is a Professor in the Teacher Education Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha where she teaches research and statistics classes. Her research interests include educator dispositions, organizational climate, and scale development. Email: *lschulte@mail.unomaha.edu.*

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and would take time to master. We gained new appreciation for resiliency, for "trying again tomorrow" when the end of the day left us feeling a bit discouraged about what we had accomplished.

3. Integrity is everything: Be genuine; be fair; be consistent.

Integrity has been ranked as the most important component in workplace relationships (Schindler & Thomas, 1993). We define integrity as doing the right thing when nobody is watching, acting on one's principles and demonstrating one's commitments both publicly and privately. Along with being genuine and demonstrating integrity, a department chair must foster "organizational justice," which requires putting fair procedures and processes in place and consistently adhering to them (Dessler, 1999). As department chairs we led the largest and smallest departments in our college, but regardless of department size, we found fostering organizational justice essential in keeping faculty and staff members motivated and productive. Most faculty and staff members are willing to cooperate if they believe you are genuine, fair, and consistent.

4. Figure out what motivates each faculty and staff member and use it.

As chairs we recognized the need to learn what motivates faculty and staff members in order to maximize performance (Kerr, 1999; Vroom, 1964). Because we work in the field of education where financial rewards often are not available, we frequently had to rely on non-financial rewards such as praise and recognition of performance. The distribution of non-financial rewards "tends to be consistent with the principles of effective rewards" (Kerr, 1999, p. 68), thus creating our own means by which to reinforce their contributions proved to be of value to our faculty and staff. Genuine affirmations for contributions, celebrating successes, and sincere empathy for personal and professional challenges nurture a sense of well-being, a cohesion among colleagues that permeates a unit and fosters collaborative, productive relationships among professionals.

5. Capitalize on the strengths of others—be willing to delegate when appropriate.

We recognized the importance of fostering interdependence in our departments. One way to do this was to delegate authority, thereby empowering the faculty and staff members who were capable of handling the responsibilities of a given task (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Supporting the competence of faculty members by identifying appropriate opportunities to delegate leadership strengthens a unit. Recognizing good ideas and assisting faculty and staff in actualizing them was an important responsibility for us as chairs. We believed that our position was about influence, not power, and we embraced the idea that our primary work was to remove obstacles or create opportunities for faculty and staff to be productive. Operating on the premise that the "ideal" professional environment is one in which faculty could both contribute and grow, it was incumbent upon us to delegate wisely by assessing both our degree of confidence in another's ability to be successful and by recognizing their readiness for a new challenge. When there was no one available who had the expertise, interest, or time to take on another task, we learned that it was better to continue to do the task ourselves.

6. Talk less, listen more.

In our new roles as chairs we found we spent a lot of our time talking with and listening to the faculty and staff members, which differed from how we allocated our time as faculty members. We had to learn how to listen as well as how to make ourselves heard. We needed to get the faculty and staff members involved in our decisions, and the best way to do that was to ask them for their input and listen to them before acting (The Walk the Talk Company, 2003). We quickly learned that leadership "is a dialogue, not a monologue" (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 15). We found that listening to faculty and staff members' ideas resulted in greater ownership of decisions and increased progress on departmental initiatives.

7. Trust your instincts (but back them up with data).

We empowered our faculty and staff members by delegating authority and listening to them. Nevertheless, we knew as chairs we were ultimately responsible for outcomes (Offermann, 2004). We learned early on to trust our instincts while verifying them with data. This meant gathering and interpreting both soft and hard data (Collins, 2001; Goffee & Jones, 2000). We needed to read verbal and non-verbal cues from faculty and staff members while, at the same time, we had to interpret numerical data from budgets and programs to make the best decisions for our departments.

8. Leave a paper trail. Never leave a paper trail.

Although we needed data to make decisions, some situations called for putting information in writing, thereby creating a paper trail, while other situations required a mental trace with no paper trail. Policies, procedures, and minutes of meetings are examples where we created a paper trail (Dessler, 1999). We could draw upon the written documents in the future when necessary. On the other hand, when dealing with personnel, we oftentimes relied on our mental trace, recalling how personnel responded in similar situations.

9. Choose your battles.

As chairs we needed to choose our battles and focus our attention on what we considered to be most important. For example, neither of us would compromise when it came to our students and the programs they deserved. We believed in setting high standards for our programs and expected faculty and staff members to follow our lead. We had to demonstrate with our actions "an unwavering resolve to do whatever must be done to produce the best long-term results, no matter how difficult" (Collins, 2001, p. 36).

10. Keep your sense of humor.

Recognizing that a department chair's mood and behavior influence the moods and behavior of faculty and staff members (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2001), we learned to maintain our sense of humor even in the stressful times. We provided each other with a means to reflect upon stressful situations, saving our meltdowns for each other. The ability to laugh at ourselves and to find the humor in situations generally stabilized emotions, allowing us to regroup and think more clearly about what needed to be resolved.

Conclusion

Documenting our journey as new chairs these past two years has been therapeutic for us. We are very fortunate to have had each other to confide in because "finding a trusted friend" has been instrumental in our ability to do the other nine things on our top 10 list.

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