

Postdoc Academic Chat #1

HOW ACADEMIA REALLY WORKS What You Don't Know Can Surprise (and bite) You

#1 November 6, 2009

A look at the structure and organization of higher education followed by two examples of conflict management and resolution that can help you avoid painful mistakes early on.

#1 THE CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION OF ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS AND THE ORGANIZATION OF A 'TYPICAL' UNIVERSITY (1,062 WORDS)

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#3 HEALING TIME: PEACEMAKING IN TWO TROUBLED DEPARTMENTS (2,136 WORDS)

#1 THE CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION OF ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS AND THE ORGANIZATION OF A 'TYPICAL' UNIVERSITY (1,062 WORDS)

The Carnegie Classification Of Academic Institutions

Below is the traditional classification of the colleges and universities in the United States developed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The Foundation has developed a more recent and much more detailed classification system, [<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/index.asp?key=782>] however, the one below will serve best for discussion purposes.

Research I and II universities offer a full range of baccalaureate programs and graduate education through the doctorate level, award 50 or more doctoral degrees a year, and receive at least \$15.5 million in Federal research support annually.

Doctorate-granting I and II institutions offer a full range of baccalaureate programs and graduate education through the doctorate level but in a narrower range than the research universities. They award at least 20 doctoral degrees in at least three disciplines; no Federal research fund limit is required.

Master's (comprehensive I and II) institutions offer a broad range of baccalaureate programs and, generally, graduate education through the master's degree. The latter often focuses on occupational or professional disciplines such as engineering or business administration. Minimum enrollment is 1,500 students.

Baccalaureate (liberal arts I and II) colleges are mostly 4-year institutions focused on awarding a bachelor's degree. A few highly selective colleges award more than 40 percent of their baccalaureates in liberal arts and science fields.

Associate of arts (2-year) colleges offer certificate or degree programs through the associate's degree level and, with few exceptions, offer no bachelor's degrees.

Professional and other specialized schools offer various degrees, including doctorates, but they specialize in religious training; medicine and health; law; engineering and technology; business and management; art, music, and design; and education. The category also includes corporate-sponsored institutions.

The Organization of a 'Typical' University

From time to time it is useful to review the university structure since, believe it or not, there are many faculty and students in higher education who are unaware of what takes place beyond the department level. The brief excerpt below gives a nice summary the typical U.S. university structure for easy reference. It is from Chapter 2: The Scientific Investigator Within the University Structure in, *Making the Right Moves: A Practical Guide to Scientific Management for Postdocs and New Faculty*, based on the BWF-HHMI Course in Scientific Management for the Beginning Academic Investigator. Burroughs Welcome Fund. Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Chevy Chase, Maryland. Copyright © 2004 by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and Burroughs Welcome Fund All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Although the major goal of the U.S. universities is the advancement and dissemination of knowledge, universities also need funding to support their activities. A university must seek revenue from a variety of sources and more and more, faculty members are encourage to generate income. You will need to make your research program either self-supporting or demonstrably worth its cost in

some other way.

Most U.S. research universities have roughly similar organizational and reporting structures. The titles of the executive officials **may** vary, but their functions are generally the same. The organization of a university's administrative staff and its methods of operation reflect a strong tradition of faculty dominance.

University-Wide Responsibility

* Board of trustees or board of regents. The university's highest authority, this governing board is composed of academic, business, and community leaders who hold appointed or elected positions with specific terms. The board meets regularly to review all major policy, financial, and management decisions, including decisions about faculty appointments, promotions, and tenure.

* President or chancellor. The university's chief executive officer, this individual has general oversight of the university's academic programs and financial health. He or she is also the university's public spokesperson, dealing with "big-picture" issues such as relationships with the legislature and other funding bodies, alumni relations, and fund-raising.

* Provost or vice president for academic affairs. As the university's chief academic officer, the provost has programmatic and budgetary oversight over all academic activities. The provost reviews the appointment papers of new faculty members and receives reports from the promotion and tenure committee. The deans of the various colleges report to the provost for academic-related matters. In some universities, vice presidents who are involved with academic affairs (e.g., research, student affairs) also report to the provost.

* Vice president for administration and finance. The university's chief financial officer, this individual is in charge of the fiscal affairs of the university and often also oversees diverse functions such as facilities planning and construction, human resources, and campus services (e.g., parking, public safety, maintenance, and mail service).

* Vice president for research. The university's chief research officer, this individual oversees grants and contracts, research funding, research centers, and institutes, issues relating to technology transfer (patenting and licensing), and research-related committees such as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) for human subjects research and institutional animal care and use committees.

Other vice presidents have responsibility for other areas that **may** affect the life of a faculty scientist directly or indirectly. These include the following:

* Vice president for information technology. This individual oversees the university's computer facilities and telephone systems.

* Vice president for health sciences. This individual is responsible for the university's health-related institutions, including the medical center and the other health professional schools. (See "Organization of a 'Typical' Academic Health Center," page 30.)

* Vice president for student affairs. This individual oversees dormitories, recreational facilities, and other necessities of student life and is concerned with issues of student well-being.

* Vice president for development. This individual manages fund-raising, alumni networks, and university relations.

School- or College-Level Responsibility

- Dean. All department chairs report to the dean, who is responsible for the administration of a school or college. A university **may** have several schools or colleges. Each college **may** also have an associate or assistant dean or both.
- Department chair. Each college is likely to have several departments, and in the sciences, separate scientific programs within each department. The dean typically appoints the department chair, with input from the tenured faculty, for a limited time period.
- Within that time frame, however, the department chair exercises considerable control over the allocation of resources within the department, including space, use of support staff, and purchases of equipment and supplies. The department chair makes teaching assignments and oversees the evaluation of faculty performance. The departmental promotion and tenure committee makes its recommendations to the department chair, who then presents the recommendation to the university-wide promotion and tenure committee.

#2 CONFLICT: A MOST DIFFICULT TASK (1,479 WORDS)

This article is based on a presentation at the 26th annual Academic Chairpersons Conference, February 11-13, 2009, Orlando, Florida.

Recently I received a lengthy and detailed email from a senior member of the division instructing me to reprimand another colleague who had not done something this colleague thought should have been done.

Actually, I thought this conflict had finally been resolved months ago. This particular situation was one I inherited - with a long history and deeply rooted. Symptoms of the dispute surface at seemingly random times. It's like the Hatfield's and the McCoy's. You'd like to think you're an effective enough manager that had you been there at the beginning, you could have prevented it. But now, layers of the conflict are somewhat indefinable and unsolvable.

One of the greatest challenges-yet essential job duties of the department chair-is being willing to deal with conflict. The chair's role also includes knowing when and how to be involved.

In this article, I share several conflict resolution strategies and principles that I've used both as a department and division chair, including seek to understand the problem before responding, use the principle of "least energy," change the channel, think of all communication as conflict prevention, and develop a vision for resolution.

Seek to Understand the Problem Before Responding

Although the situation just described has been perplexing, there have been many occasions when simply listening to someone's concern has resolved a problem. Once the problem is clearly defined, often a clear solution comes into focus. Even if the solution doesn't come immediately, the person at least **may** feel heard and valued. Behind every conflict is an explanation. Behind every problem with productivity or cultural misalignment is a story. All of us are faced with the pressures of work-life balance that **may** impact our performance on the job.

Many times I've realized the most effective thing I could do is to listen. Rather than sit in the office, I often suggest a walk on campus and through the nearby neighborhood-I with a small notepad and pen. We come back feeling better and with a clearer perspective about the situation. To get to the heart of the matter, ask yourself:

- * What is the person saying with words?
- * What is the predominant emotion in this situation?
- * What other sources of information do I need to gather to truly understand what's going on?

Use the Principle of "Least Energy"

Not everything can or should be resolved in the workplace. Just like people, conflict situations are often complex. Some issues **may** present themselves as workplace problems but are really personal in nature. In many situations we need only to achieve the professional cooperation necessary to work together or focus on the task. In the workplace we can ask for behavioral change more easily than we can demand a change of heart or attitude. The most effective approach **may** be the thing that requires the least involvement. Here are some suggestions.

Watch, wait, or ignore.

Some things will take care of themselves. For example, many departments have individuals who are simply negative by nature. As long as the other members don't take their negative comments too literally, much of their interaction can be understood as benign rather than as an attempt to pick a fight.

Affirm positives.

I'll explain why it's helpful to have information by a certain date and thank faculty in advance for working to get their reports or schedules turned in on time.

Faculty **may** be struggling in one area of performance but excelling at another. I can affirm people where they are doing well.

Take action minimally, informally, or generally.

I **may** include general reminders about deadlines to the group, without having to target individuals. I **may** share a concern or an observation over a meal rather than in a conference in my office.

Use policies, processes, or programs already in place.

As an example, colleges have processes and policies for handling various types of disputes. As a chair, my role is not to engage in every complaint that arrives on my desk but to help students or faculty understand and use the processes available to them.

Likewise, if I'm using a mediation model to help individuals or small groups work through an issue, I'll explain that the process will provide the "rules" of how we're going to approach and discuss the presenting issue.

Develop new policies, processes, or programs to address the situation.

In the last few years the issue of secondhand smoke and the locations of the designated smoking areas have increasingly become problems on our campus. My college recently launched a successful tobacco-free campus campaign leading up to the adoption of a tobacco-free campus policy. The new policy has received strong support from the various constituent groups across campus, including smokers. The policy also resolved the issue of smoking-related littering and the corridor of smoke at building entrances.

Change the Channel

A common problem I've observed in the workplace is the use of the wrong medium to convey a message. People often use email to discuss and sort through issues that should only be addressed in person or by phone. More is accomplished in person when decisions require discussion and a reliance on nonverbal cues for understanding.

Recently I observed a pattern of conflict erupting between two departments when it came time to plan for semester course scheduling. These faculty units were interdependent, yet housed in two different divisions and located on different parts of campus. They rarely saw each other or interacted. They had to coordinate both their course offerings and staffing, but- out of convenience-communicated only by email. When the problem came to me, I had to advise faculty to respond to emails by picking up the phone and communicating directly. Of course, playing a little phone tag was less convenient than sending email missiles, but much more was accomplished. Talking kept the exchanges more professional and much of the misunderstanding was eliminated.

Within the division I've had to encourage departments to intentionally create common department meeting times with other units with whom they share faculty or projects. When a department needs to schedule a meeting with another, they've already built in the time and space to do so.

I also have a time limit on our monthly division meetings, which means monitoring how many issues can go on the agenda for any one meeting. Honoring a reasonable time limit on the

larger meeting enables the subgroups to have short joint meetings afterwards, if needed.

Some organizations are limiting the use of internal email by intentionally restricting its use. For example, as a way to cut down on its overuse, employees **may** be instructed to communicate only in person or by phone with one another on Fridays. Email is a convenient tool- I don't know how we ever did business without it-but it's a poor channel for complex decision making, relationship building, or conflict resolution.

Think of All Communication as Conflict Prevention

Many employees see department meetings as a nuisance, but the value of a well-run meeting is that it provides important face time, builds a foundation for communicating, and provides opportunities for team building. Having successful interpersonal relationships makes communicating by phone or email more effective as well. When conflict does occur, we're more likely to give the other party more latitude and judge intent more positively when there's a good relationship.

When there have been the funds to do so, I've arranged for either the first or the midyear faculty meeting to be off campus in a scenic and comfortable location for team building. Having a light agenda, providing a meal, and giving the faculty time to discuss larger issues has helped us build relationships. Interacting out of our normal setting also helps us create new patterns of relating.

I'm also intentional in my communication by making sure all meetings and emails are positive in tone. In addition, to emphasize a strong teaching excellence agenda in the division, we incorporate a brief portion of all our meetings to teaching tips or some type of faculty development on teaching. It emphasizes what our true purpose is as a group-not just discussing proposals or rehashing old issues.

Develop a Vision for Resolution

When I'm mediating a situation, a common question I'll ask is: "What would you like to see as an outcome to this meeting?" While agreement on the presenting issues **may** be difficult to achieve, often the parties will readily identify and agree that they want the bickering and emotional drain to cease. We find ways to achieve that as a common goal.

I've never met anyone who didn't appreciate a well-run meeting. Agreeing to ground rules to help us achieve that outcome leads to better decision making and

better processes. By doing so, we create a vision of what we want to see happen and a positive goal to work toward.

#3 HEALING TIME: PEACEMAKING IN TWO TROUBLED DEPARTMENTS(2,136 WORDS)

In this postings, Robert Sommer, distinguished professor of psychology emeritus at the University of California, Davis., describes his efforts to resolve major department conflicts. He has had plenty of experience. In his time at Davis he chaired four departments, three of them as an outside chair specifically brought in to resolve conflicts. Reprinted from an unpublished article with permission of the author who can be reached at: [rosommer@ucdavis.edu].

After teaching on the same campus for over 30 years, I was ready for a new challenge. When offered the opportunity to become outside chair of a department in turmoil, I eagerly accepted. Trained as a social psychologist, I had a professional and a personal interest in conflict resolution. This would be an opportunity to try out some of the theories that I had taught in my classes and to give something back to the university.

The Widget Department had been established in 1983 to house two programs in the applied arts, each of which had separated from a different department. At the time of my arrival, the two programs were in open conflict, far beyond the moderate amount that some organizational theorists view as necessary for optimal job performance. I was appointed outside chair by the college dean with the assent of faculty in the two programs following several years of fruitless mediation and negotiation. There had been more than 30 meetings between faculty representing the two programs during the previous year. Each group felt that the other was unwilling to negotiate. The French describe this as *le dialogue des sourds*, a dialogue of the deaf, in which each speaks but neither hears what is said. The conflict was overt, with threats of lawsuits, resignations, and transfers. If I had been brought in at an earlier stage, it would have been logical to bring people together to negotiate. In a state of open warfare, this approach did not seem practicable or fruitful.

In approaching novel situations, I often use metaphor. Metaphors serve as fresh sources of insight for analysis and solutions. If the metaphor proves deceptive, superficial, or incomplete, it is easily modified or discarded. Taking the problem into a different conceptual realm also provides oft-needed detachment.

The Widget Department resembled Beirut of the early 1980s, a city in anarchy, where armed militias roamed, took hostages, made demands, and terrorized the

civilian population. Cease-fires were declared and broken with regularity. Snipers operated on both sides of the green line. Using Beirut as metaphor, I developed an agenda for the Widget Department based on a sequence of tasks: stop the shooting, disarm the militias; free the hostages; comfort survivors; neutralize snipers; locate booby-traps and mine fields; develop common projects for the two units; cope with outside threats; find indigenous leadership; ratify a formal peace treaty; and create a new structure.

These measures proved successful in reducing the conflict. New leadership was found from among those who had not been directly involved in the conflict and a structure created that would minimize the occurrence of future conflict. Each program was given its own budget, space, and personnel procedures. The shared features of the two programs would continue, in terms of a joint administrative center, computer laboratory, shop, and a few other designated facilities that would benefit from economies of scale. There would be no department chair as such. Each program head would possess the authority of a chair in dealing with outside authorities and report to a different associate dean. The deans strongly supported the new arrangement since it retained economies associated with a combined department while separating the two programs in those areas previously associated with conflict. One year later, comments regarding the administrative structure from department members continued to be positive, and the dean's office expressed sufficient confidence in the new structure to allow each program to recruit for new faculty members. No new hiring had been done during my three-year term, reflecting the administration's earlier lack of confidence in the unit.

Creating conditions necessary for stability required three years of intense effort. The experience exacted a heavy psychological cost. I frequently had difficulty getting to sleep, tossed and turned throughout the night, and awoke not feeling rested. My emotional life was drained and anhedonic; my libido disappeared. This allowed me to focus attention on department matters. There was no deterioration in my ability to pull together information, ignore distractions, answer correspondence, or write reports. I found myself able to give more to the Widget Department than to my family or hobbies.

As my assignment in the Widget Department drew to a close, I sent feelers to several deans seeking a new challenge. There were a number of equally troubled departments on campus lacking competent leadership. I expressly hoped for an assignment in an unfamiliar field. I believe that the skills required of a department chair, like those of deans, college presidents, and clerical staff, are generic rather than specific to a field or discipline. Becoming chair of Chemistry or Hematology, as examples, would provide an opportunity for me to test the concept of generic chairmanship.

Within two weeks of my leaving the Widget Department, a dean asked me to chair the DE Department housing two programs, one in humanities and the other in social science. Based on the duality in the department name, I supposed that this was another Lebanon with warring militias. As I spent more time in DE, I dropped the metaphor of Beirut. I found interpersonal hostility, nepotism, inertia, and rampant self-interest. I began to think of DE as a superfund site which EPA had sent me to clean up. The contamination was widespread, had seeped into cracks and crevices, and was working its way down into the groundwater where it might contaminate other localities. The office staff and the undergraduates, perhaps like the cockroaches who can survive radioactive contamination, seemed protected by their lack of power and involvement.

I did not succeed in cleaning up the toxic contamination. My appointment was for an initial year, renewable for a second. I lasted only a single year, plus an additional month when no successor could be located. I was requested by the dean to remain longer but declined. Based on my experiences during the first year, there was no possibility of a successful clean-up. Polluters were still on-site adding to the mountain of untreated refuse. The worst offenders considered themselves immune from regulations. I could not buy out the polluters and did not possess the authority to control their activities. Mere argument proved ineffective in preventing all but the most egregious toxic dumping. Where previously this had been done in daylight, now it took place at night or surreptitiously dripped from unmarked truck beds onto public roads. My superiors showed no inclination to challenge the existing order. If I had been totally immersed in the metaphor, I would have imagined that they were paid off by the polluters. Given the realities of academe, it was more reasonable to imagine that my superiors wanted to avoid an unpleasant and probably unwinnable political and legal battle. I could have borne the burdens if there had been a long-term solution, but there was not. I began to think of myself as part of the problem. So long as I remained in DE, and could restrict the seepage of toxic materials from the site, my superiors could turn their attention to other, more critical problems.

Imagining DE as a pollution hot spot suggested three solutions--on-site treatment, dilution, and dispersal. Treatment on-site required mechanical or biological cleaning systems appropriate for the particular contaminants and the authority and resources to use them. The laissez faire regulatory climate of the campus precluded this approach since the worst polluters acted as if they had lifetime licenses for dumping. I lacked the authority to go beyond persuasion and negotiation that had probably been as successful in halting industrial pollution as they were in DE. Any attempt to apply sanctions would lack outside support and meet immediate legal challenge.

An alternative would be dilution of contaminants by bringing in benign materials.

In a larger mass, the harmful effects of contaminants will be less strong. Unfortunately, budget stringencies limited importation of new materials to the site. Besides, my superiors were not willing to commit fresh resources into a toxic dump that had resisted all clean-up efforts. They believed, and I could not contradict them, that contamination of the new materials would be more likely than an overall reduction in toxicity.

The third option for dealing with the contamination was dispersal. Trucking toxic materials to other sites would accomplish several objectives. It would lower pollution levels in DE and make the problems on-site more manageable.

I spent my last month in DE attempting to export faculty. The deans and I talked with individual faculty and approached other units that might be suitable homes. With its reputation for discord, it was not unexpected that potential hosts should display a NIMBY attitude. We considered remote locations, across jurisdictional boundaries. The legal and procedural requirements of such transfers proved formidable and our barges full of toxic waste were consistently rejected by ports with strong regulatory authority. We found several smaller ports so desperate for trade that they were willing not to inspect the cargo too closely. The solution was to export everything for which a destination could be found and keep the remainder together for a transitional period, during which time additional efforts at dispersal would be made.

Comparing the two experiences as outside chair, I can identify several reasons for the different outcomes. Time is an important consideration in healing. I spent three years in the Widget Department and one year in DE. I would have stayed longer in DE, except for another difference between the two experiences. The dean had told faculty in the Widget Department that they would have to remain together as an administrative unit, that each was too small to exist independently. This allowed me to base my reform efforts on the assumption that if people had to live together, they should learn to get along. In contrast, the dean responsible for DE had given the green light to faculty transfers to other units. This removed any motivation on the part of faculty who saw greener pastures elsewhere to make accommodations with their colleagues. It was the proposed departure of almost half of the DE faculty, which had been initiated before my arrival, that led me to conclude that the DE Department had no future.

Another reason for the difference in the two outcomes was that I could locate a "center" in the Widget Department but not in DE. There were faculty in both Widget programs who had not been actively involved in the earlier conflicts. Perhaps because DE was a smaller unit, and the chair had been the direct source of many of the problems, none of the faculty in DE had escaped involvement. There was no center in DE separate from the warring factions.

Finally, personal animosities were more extreme in DE than in the Widget Department. The latter represented intergroup conflict (Program A versus Program B) while Department DE was characterized more by interpersonal hostility. As an outside chair in the Widget Department, my authority was used to separate the two programs, but in the incestuous family-like setting of DE, individuals were constantly insulting and sniping at one another. There were no clear turf lines to be drawn in this type of situation. People had offices next to one another and all shared the same small space and facilities.

This combination of factors, the increased time spent in the Widget Department (three years as compared with one), the decision of higher authority to keep the Widget Department together as compared to a green light for departures in DE, the existence of a center in the Widget Department and none in DE, and the more intense personal animosities in DE, accounted for the difference in the effectiveness of my intervention.

There were people in both departments that I liked and respected. Those in DE were no more or less productive or creative than those in the Widget Department. By coincidence each department at the beginning of my term contained two bomb throwers. The two in the Widget Department either departed or retired before my term ended. One of those in DE was slated for a transfer to another department during my term. The second desired to transfer but no department wanted this person. If I had worked at it, I probably could have located a home for the second bomb thrower. However, if the two bomb throwers were allowed to transfer, it would be difficult to deny the same option to other faculty seeking a more productive work environment. Given the small size of the unit, the exodus would have had significant implications for the future viability of the unit. Time was a positive factor in allowing for the transfer of disruptive faculty, but a negative in terms of the bleak future for a unit that had shrunk below critical size for survival. I blame myself for leaving DE before problems could be resolved, but seeing no future for the department erased any desire to remain longer.
