

# Conducting Difficult Performance Counseling Sessions

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**Presenter:** Mary Lou Higginson, Vice President for Academic Affairs Emeritus, Baldwin Wallace University, Berea, OH 44017-2088. Email: mlhigger@bw.edu.

## Session Notes

**Definition:** In *The Department Chair as Academic Leader*, Hecht, Higginson, Gmelch, and Tucker define performance counseling as a "regular although not necessarily formal contact between the chairperson and individual faculty members for the purpose of discussing successes and failures in completing assignments and duties (p. 104)."

**Reconceptualize the Task:** The practical (and helpful) difference between performance *review* and performance *counseling*

### Performance Counseling Can Improve:

- Faculty performance
- Chair/faculty relationships
- Chair credibility
- Department climate
- Promotion and tenure review

## **Characteristics of Positive Performance Counseling**

1. Performance counseling is a year-round (not yearly) activity.
2. Performance counseling encompasses formal and informal evaluations of job performance.
3. Job performance expectations are clear.
4. Performance goals are specific and manageable.
5. Evaluative comments focus on an individual's performance and not an individual's personality.



## **Guidelines for Documenting Performance Counseling Sessions**

1. Accurately reflect the content of the meeting.
2. Avoid giving mixed signals.
3. Be specific in summarizing evaluative comments.
4. Reiterate specific suggestions for improvement.
5. Write so that a third person could read the evaluation summary and understand the issues.

## **Cultivating a Culture of On-going Performance Counseling**

### 1. Take advantage of the interview to

- Assess professional development needs
- Assess receptiveness to performance counseling
- Set performance expectations
- Establish expectations for continuous performance counseling

### 2. Conduct a new faculty/staff orientation that augments any orientation offered elsewhere at the institution

### 3. Enlist others to help with performance counseling including

- Experienced and constructive role models within the department
- Experienced and constructive role models from anywhere on the campus
- Experienced and constructive role models from outside the institution
- Employee Assistance or other programs at the institution

### 4. Help select and support professional development opportunities

More information on how to cultivate a culture of on-going performance counseling can be found in part two of *Communication Strategies for Managing Conflict: A Guide for Academic Leaders* (2016) by Mary Lou Higgerson. ISBN 978-1-118-76162-5.

## **General Leadership Communication Strategies For Working With Difficult Personalities**

### Establish a Culture That Curtails Difficult Behavior

- Promote a shared vision
- Make expectations clear
- Make the context clear
- Practice open communication
- Practice one-to-many communication
- Defuse sensitive issues

### Managing the Immediate Situation

- Discern motivation
- Separate fact from fiction
- View issue and situation from difficult person's perspective
- Reduce unnecessary defensiveness
  - Stay on the issue
  - Language use
  - Timing
- Look for win-win

More information on how to use these leadership communication strategies can be found on pages 167-212 of *Effective Leadership Communication: A Guide for Department Chairs and Deans for Managing Difficult Situations and People* (2007) by Mary Lou Higginson and Teddi Joyce. ISBN 978-1-933371-19-1.

## **Leadership Communications Strategies For Managing Especially Difficult Personalities**

### For Managing Personal Agendas

- Create a shared vision
- Establish and sustain processes that support the shared vision
- Discern misguided motives
- Consider the immediate and long-range context

### For Containing the Pot Stirrer/Trouble Maker

- Practice open communication
- Practice one-to-many communication
- Make the context clear
- Anticipate pot-stirring activity

### For Working with the Prima Donna/Drama Queen

- Stay on the issue
- Time your intervention well
- Play to the audience
- Assess underlying motives and statements of fact

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## **Leadership Communication Strategies For Managing Especially Difficult Personalities**

### For Managing the Confrontation Junkie

- Resist taking the bait
- Defuse sensitive issues
- Build a firewall
- Structure the process

### For Engaging the Passive and Indifferent Soul

- Assess the motivation for indifference
- Make expectations clear
- Be transparent
- Value participation

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## **Case: Superstar or Naive**

### **Background Information:**

Two years ago, the director successfully recruited a talented oboist, Igor Pryor, to join the School of Music faculty. With the school's commitment to building a strong performance faculty, the director deemed this to be an important hire. Professor Pryor's appointment also filled an opening in the school's woodwind quintet, a group that has enjoyed an international reputation. The dean was apprehensive about making an offer to Pryor because he did not possess the traditional academic credentials. After weeks of heated debate, the director finally persuaded the dean to accept Pryor's vast experience as a professional musician as equivalent to the requisite graduate degrees and to approve the hire of Igor Pryor.

During his first two years, Professor Pryor managed to win the acclaim of the other members of the woodwind quintet as a talented musician. In addition, he exhibited considerable expertise in his efforts to promote the quintet's professional reputation. It was Professor Pryor who orchestrated the quintet's booking for a one-month tour of Europe last semester. Professor Pryor has maintained a rigorous performance schedule as a member of the area symphony orchestra. In the area of performance, Professor Pryor has proved to be even more impressive than anyone had anticipated.

### **The Problem:**

Unfortunately, Professor Pryor pays little attention to anything other than performance. During the past two years, the director has received numerous complaints from students who report that Professor Pryor is hard to find and does not keep office hours or scheduled appointments with students. Some of the complaints suggest that his classes are not well prepared. Students report that Professor Pryor does not distribute a course syllabus and the basis for assigned grades is never clear. Only three of the six students originally enrolled in oboe instruction for credit remain. From this group, you have heard complaints that Professor Pryor often cancels, without notice, scheduled lessons.

The one time that the director assigned Professor Pryor to teach a theory class which has a large enrollment, he protested on the basis that his travel schedule, as dictated by his membership in the woodwind quintet, would cause him to miss too many classes. After several meetings on the matter, the class was assigned to another faculty member. Professor Pryor believes that he should only engage in small group or one-on-one instruction that can fit in around his performance schedule.

Professor Pryor's performance in the area of school and university service has lacked commitment and effort. He accepts committee assignments willingly, but then fails to take an active role. This lax attitude toward all committee assignments has been

noticed by others. Professor Pryor is the school's only representative on the College Advisory Council, but the dean has indicated his disappointment that the School's elected representative only attended one of six meetings held during the past semester.

**Current Situation:**

University policy requires that the director meet at least once each year with every non-tenured faculty member to review their progress toward meeting the standards for promotion and tenure. This meeting is to be documented with a written record of what was discussed. Last year the director opted to soft pedal the criticism of Pryor's teaching and service because the director believed that he needed at least one year to become acclimated to the school and the university. The director is about to have the second annual meeting with Professor Pryor. The director now believes that Pryor has had ample time to become acquainted with the teaching and service components of his appointment.

While the director recognizes the tremendous benefit derived from Professor Pryor's strong performance record, the director also realizes that without documentation of effective teaching and service, Professor Pryor will not be able to obtain tenure or promotion at the university. Furthermore, the director recognizes that unless Professor Pryor qualifies for promotion and tenure, the school will not be able to sell the dean on the hire of any other performance-oriented individual. The director is preparing for the second evaluation session with Professor Pryor.

Taken from Higginson, Mary Lou (1996). *Communication Skills for Department Chairs*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company.

## **Case Study: The Self-Centered Team Member**

### **Meet Professor Wright:**

Professor Wright, an established and prolific scholar, was influential in building interest in an unique research area that at one time was considered trivial to most members of the professional association. Wright was a pioneer in transforming this initially-slighted research subject into a recognized subspecialty of the discipline that is now able to support a new journal in the discipline.

In the department, Professor Wright teaches 500-level courses in his research specialty. Even though the department boasts a healthy graduate enrollment, the number of students seeking to pursue a masters or doctorate in this subspecialty is small, and Dr. Wright's seminars typically enroll two or three students. Three years ago the institution established a general guideline that 500 level courses should only be taught with enrollments of five or more students. This guideline is not strictly enforced by the central administration, but course enrollment and credit hour generation data are frequently used by the dean as a basis for justifying budget reductions. Dr. Wright is unconcerned. He perceives budget worries as "the administration's problem." He feels no shame in his low enrollments because, as he explains, his field is a difficult one that can only be pursued by the very brightest graduate students.

### **The Department's Chair's Perspective:**

The chair perceives the low enrollment as a significant problem, but is uncertain how to manage the situation. Last semester, the department chair insisted that Dr. Wright teach an undergraduate course with thirty students with disastrous results. The chair spent considerable time listening to student complaints. The student drop rate for the course was 40 percent which created a back log of students who need to take the course before graduation.

The undergraduate student complaints are consistent with the department chair's perception of Dr. Wright. Students complain that Dr. Wright refuses to explain the course content. Furthermore, students that persist in seeking a clearer explanation for course material are chastised in front of the class. According to the students, Dr. Wright is quick to conclude that bright and hard working students do not have difficulty, and therefore, those students in need of help are either dumb or lazy.

### **Faculty Colleagues:**

Dr. Wright exhibits the same air of superiority in working with other faculty in the department. He uses dissertation and thesis committees as a forum to interrogate faculty colleagues on their "narrow" or "inadequate" grasp of the discipline. Consequently, faculty are not anxious to serve with Dr. Wright on graduate student

committees. Graduate students who are aware of the tension do not seek to add Dr. Wright to their committees. The few students who add Dr. Wright to a committee chaired by another faculty member find their degree completion in jeopardy. Typically, Dr. Wright follows his attack of faculty colleagues with assertions about the inferiority of their student's research. In these instances, Dr. Wright refuses to sign off on the final thesis or dissertation. When Dr. Wright serves as a student's graduate advisor, the other faculty on the committee complain that the committee never meets until the final defense and then Dr. Wright seeks approval through intimidation tactics. For the most part, graduate students either study with Dr. Wright or they study with the rest of the department.

Dr. Wright's alienation from his colleagues extends to social gatherings in the department which he refuses to attend. The more estranged Dr. Wright becomes, the more he seems content to view the rift as evidence of his superiority. Dr. Wright reasons that his colleagues are inferior and jealous of his intellect and standing in the discipline.

### **Other Issues:**

As a tenured full professor in the department, Dr. Wright votes on all applications for promotion and tenure. Dr. Wright has not voted in favor of a colleague's promotion or tenure for more than five years. This causes the department to submit dossiers which contain a split vote. Split votes are interpreted by the central administration as an indication that the faculty candidate does not clearly meet the standard.

It is also apparent to central administration that the department faculty disagree. To those not familiar with the discipline or the nature of the conflict, the department appears to be divided between the productive researcher and the other faculty. Because the institution has a strong research mission, the central administration gives Dr. Wright more empathy than the department chair would like. This perception is fueled by Dr. Wright who takes every opportunity to write lengthy letters detailing his numerous accomplishments despite the lax standards of his colleagues to various members of the central administration.

### **The Department Chair's Challenge:**

The institution does not require formal performance evaluation of tenured full professors. It is clear, however, that Dr. Wright's current behavior is jeopardizing the welfare of the department. The department chair needs to counsel Dr. Wright into exercising more productive behavior that contributes positively to the general health of the department.

Taken from Higginson, Mary Lou. (1996). *Communication Skills for Department Chairs*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company.

**Case: The Poor Follow-up**

Professor Igor Pryor  
School of Music  
East Campus

Dear Professor Pryor:

Without question, you have maintained an extensive performance schedule both as a member of the woodwind quintet and as a solo performer. I am pleased with your numerous and significant accomplishments in the area of performance. Your work to earn international visibility for the woodwind quintet and the School of Music is exemplary.

I recognize that you work hard teaching oboe to the three students that remain in oboe instruction. I look forward to talking with you further about how to design course syllabi that accommodate specific instructional objectives for students with varied levels of performance skill. Also, I wish that more students could benefit from your vast experience and talent in musical performance.

You continue to serve the School of Music in several important ways. Certainly, your work as manager of the woodwind quintet was integral to the success of that group's European tour. You serve as the School of Music's only representative on the College Advisory Council. This is a significant contribution even though your attendance at committee meetings is disappointing.

I was surprised to learn that you believe that some of your colleagues are jealous of your achievements. I sense that you fear this could result in an unjustified negative vote on your tenure. I cannot point to anything that might substantiate your fear. Indeed, I've seen several music faculty with strong performance records promoted and/or tenured over the past several years with a strong endorsement from their faculty colleagues.

I enjoyed having an opportunity to review your numerous activities and accomplishments. I hope that next year is both productive and rewarding.

Sincerely,

Hope Samuels  
Director

Taken from Higginson, Mary Lou. (1996). *Communication Skills for Department Chairs*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company.

### **Case: The Invisible Tenured Full Professor**

Dr. Ford is a tenured full professor who teaches his courses but does little else in the department or at the institution. The institutional policy on faculty workload prescribes full-time teaching loads and states that faculty are also expected to engage in academic advising, scholarship, and service.

As a new department chair, hired from outside the institution, you are struck by how inequitable the faculty workloads are within your department. Aside from fulfilling comparable teaching loads, there is tremendous variation among individual faculty efforts in academic advising, scholarship, and service to the department and the institution. Dr. Ford, for example, avoids all work beyond teaching while other faculty members invest significant time and talent in multiple ways. Some faculty are active in shared governance while others serve as the academic advisor to a large number of students. Still others are productive scholars. Dr. Ford typically arrives a few minutes before class, requests to teach back-to-back classes, and is out the door shortly after his last class of the day.

Dr. Ford is cordial with you and other colleagues, but spends most of his time on campus in class or working in his office behind a closed door. You have noticed that Dr. Ford's office door remains shut through posted office hours. Dr. Ford is rarely seen talking with students outside of class. Dr. Ford does not attend department or campus meetings or social gatherings. He serves on no committees and is, for all practical purposes, invisible on the campus.

You talked with Dr. Ford when he missed the first department meeting that you called since being named chair. His nonchalance about "always" missing "pointless meetings" was disarming, but you made it clear that you expect all faculty to attend department meetings. Since then, Dr. Ford attends department meetings, but never contributes to the discussion and openly grades papers throughout the meeting. Moreover, he does not hide his annoyance for being required to attend department meetings, which causes his presence to distract from department discussion.