

Turning the Titanic: Reshaping Departmental Culture as a New Chair

Although Chairs may possess great latitude in their departmental leadership, changing the culture of a department requires effort and planning. This session will focus on how a new chair increased transparency, initiated faculty development opportunities, and led by example to expand shared governance and increase faculty morale. These areas speak to the challenges faced by chairs in all phases of service, be they new or seasoned in the position.

Change is hard. As a new Chair in 2013, I took over a department that, while not in crisis, had become stagnant. My predecessor had served for 15 years and while he adequately managed departmental needs, he did not regard himself as a leader or the keeper of a departmental vision. Our ship was afloat and secure, but adrift.

When I was elected chair, I found myself in several difficult situations simultaneously and also needed to consider the health and morale of the department as a whole. The first year demanded that I attend to multiple personnel issues, some related to tenure and performance review. As a result, visionary notions were put on hold as immediate needs took priority.

In 2014, I took several deliberate steps toward changing the departmental culture for the better. I framed these steps in a statement of intention that I crafted over the summer: In a nutshell, my intention was to engage my faculty with each other, with our departmental values, and with their goals.

First off, increased transparency in the consideration of scholarship and service efforts for tenure and promotion meant that my senior faculty had to meet together to revisit these categories. Secondly, I elected to meet individually with all of my Senior Faculty to find out more about their interests and ambitions. This effort bore fruit in several ways: for example, it led to the development of an MOU that will permit one senior faculty member to reduce her teaching load to half-time. This unanticipated result of an agenda-free conversation was met with support and encouragement from the Dean, the Provost, and his cabinet. Finally, I have endeavored to lead by example. Not only was I a participant in a year-long Oklahoma Educators' Leadership Academy, but I also trained and certified as an on-campus Service Learning Scholar and to teach our Freshman Seminar, Success Central. All of these opportunities are open to my faculty and I will encourage them to take advantage of them.

As I begin to share these highlights of departmental change efforts, I will invite participants to share their backgrounds and comfort level as academic leaders. Following my presentation, I will invite participants to consider their own situations and to craft statements of intention. Perhaps the culture doesn't need changing, but priorities need to be examined. Or perhaps personnel changes require the Chair to reconsider everything from courses taught to office configuration.