

Promoting Success and Well-Being Through a Chair Support Group

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The role of the department chair has been identified as critical to the successful operation of institutions of higher education (Tucker, 1992). Department chairs are often exposed to occupational stressors that may lead to burnout. Leaders in this unique position must balance obligations to faculty, students, administrators and stakeholders. When faculty members step into academic leadership it is common for them to receive little training for the role, skills, risks, and responsibilities necessary to best serve their constituents. Moving from a very autonomous faculty position, to a very procedurally constrained administrative position can lead to stress and burnout. Academic chairs face complicated leadership challenges such as advocating for their department while serving as an agent for university administration. Excessive workload, bureaucracy, and complex problems may stretch leaders beyond their ability. According to Cipriano & Buller (2012) one of the top challenges chairs face is working with non-collegial faculty members. All of these factors can create some unique situations that lead Department Chairs to wonder what they got themselves into by accepting the position.

Peer support groups have been recommended as a useful and cost effective tool in stress prevention. The concept of social support has been broadly defined as the resources provided by other people, that is, support from similar others (Cohen & Syme, 1985). The objectives of gathering together as chairs are to provide support, information, a sense of belonging, interpersonal awareness, and create an environment where each can share their experiences (Kurtz 1997). The Department Chairs for the College of Education at the University of Nebraska at Kearney described a peer support group they

developed quite by chance. The support group took on several forms including round table meetings on campus, TGIF meetings off campus, various social events, invitations for lunch or dinner at each others homes, and often simple, subgroup spontaneous meetings.

Sharing their experiences and offering each other informational, instrumental, social and emotional support normalized stressful events encountered in their roles as chair. This normalization lessened the impact of stress, helped the chairs maintain or gain objectivity, and improve their coping skills and adjustment. The Chair support group provided validation and allowed members to vent feelings, thereby decreasing the tendency to feel alone and isolated due to their leadership role. Consultation with colleagues provided an opportunity for chairs to talk openly and honestly about challenges they share and related feelings. Careful examination of beliefs and narrow perspectives increased objectivity, self-efficacy, and sense of empowerment and control. Comparing notes about resources, getting practical advice or information, and discovering alternative options prepared the support group members to address problems, create solution and build bridges. Chairs found an opportunity to debrief reactions, successes and failures to internal and external departmental challenges.

The nature of these support group meetings involved the need for developing trust and self-disclosure. Attention to establishing safety norms (e.g. confidentiality, empathy, acceptance, etc.), fostering risk taking norms (e.g., self-disclosure, encourage healthy debate, feedback, accountability, conflict resolution, etc.) and goal setting (e.g., improved department/college performance, objectivity, shared challenges, clarified direction, improved work/life balance, personnel/student management, etc.) were strategic in

creating a culture of candor within the support group. The trusting relationships created through support group interactions helped provide a foundation to manage differences and conflict that arouse during coordinating council meetings.

In addition to support, collaboration between chairs at these group meetings led to the development of multi-department and college wide initiatives. For example, to address enrollment issues, the chairs co-wrote a proposal for an additional technology specialist to be shared among departments. This unified proposal was submitted and endorsed by the College Dean. Cooperation has helped the chairs manage personnel problems, budget restrictions, and to generate consistent solutions. Collaborative marketing of programs (brochures, posters, & advertising) has been another positive outcome. Support group discussions led to the creation of multi-department coursework. Chairs worked as a team to generate a college wide assessment of student learning outcomes for accreditation. Finally, to help celebrate student accomplishments, chairs pooled resources to provide a recognition breakfast for graduates. These are just a few of the examples that the presenters shared with participants during the roundtable discussion.

The Chair support group allowed each member to share challenges, seek advice and engage in candid conversations. Whether it's navigating the complex academic affairs process for a new program or managing faculty/student conflicts, joining a seasoned group directly connects members to an entire network of resources. During the course of the meetings, group members had a chance to share their vision and give progress reports on their current involvements. This opportunity helped the members build respect for one another and gave them each a chance to get reinforcement.

Institutional support and mentoring are key areas to improve work relationships and to minimize burnout in academic leadership. The purpose of this round table discussion was to encourage participants to consider connecting with colleagues at their institution who have a similar role and understand work-related stress and burnout risks. Chair support offers mutual reinforcement between colleagues, opportunities to share and compare experiences, engagement through stories that are different in content yet similar in process, and creative strategies for collaborative work.

References

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