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Dealing with Difficult Faculty

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Dealing With Difficult Faculty

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- NO work place is free of difficult people
 - Conflict is inevitable
- Colleges and universities are no exception
- Difficult faculty may harass colleagues, staff, students or treat them disrespectfully
- May avoid teaching, research and/or service obligations
- Make the work environment difficult and/or unpleasant

The Problem

- Difficult faculty share common characteristics
- Have a constant and predictable style of behavior
- Responses can be anticipated by those who routinely interact with them
- Thought of as difficult by many (not just the Chair)
- Occupy WAY too much time, energy and attention
- Their behavior may be out of proportion to the situation

Characteristics of Difficult Faculty

- Feel underappreciated
- Don't want to be held accountable
- Reluctant/unwilling to change
- Afraid of change
- Feel their job is more difficult than it used to be

Why Are Some Faculty Difficult?

- There are certain interaction styles faculty use when engaging others that have the potential to cause difficulty/conflict
- Important for Chairs to recognize these interaction styles and respond appropriately
- Understanding the underlying motive for the use of a particular interaction style may help the Chair minimize the conflict that may arise

Potentially Difficult Interaction Styles

- The Competing Style
- The Avoiding Style
- The Compromising Style
- The Collaborating Style
- The Accommodating Style

(Kilmann & Thomas, 1975 further described and analyzed by Burrell, 2001)

The 5 Conflict Styles

- Highly assertive, minimally cooperative
- Ignore opposing points of view
- The only goal is to win!
 - Value of Own Goal: **HIGH**; Value of Relationship: **LOW**
- Can be effective when the goal is quick action or there is little hope of consensus
 - Need to be sure of your ability to make certain the other side accepts your decision and acknowledges your power
- If overused others may not voice important concerns because they feel they will be ignored.
 - May result in lack of feedback, reduced learning and low empowerment

The Competing Style

- Deliberately ignore or withdraw from conflict rather than face head on
 - Low assertiveness, low cooperation
 - Value of Own Goal: **LOW**; Value of Relationship: **LOW**
- May be perceived as not caring
- People who avoid are hoping the problem will go away, will resolve itself without their involvement, or that others will step up and take care of it
- Can result in low levels of input from others. Issues may fester. Communication and team functioning are limited and decisions may be made by default.

The Avoiding Style

- Willing to sacrifice some or part of own goals while persuading others to do the same – split the difference, seek a middle ground.
 - No one leaves too upset or too happy
- Moderately assertive, moderately cooperative
- Value of Own Goal: **Medium**; Value of Relationship: **Medium**
- Can be the easy way out and result in reduced creativity
- May sacrifice long-term goals
- Routinely making concessions or giving in to make people happy without true resolution may result in a loss of trust

The Compromising Style

- View conflict as a problem to be solved. Aim to find creative solutions that satisfy all parties.
- Highly assertive and highly cooperative
- Value of Own Goal: **High**; Value of Relationship; **High**
- The goal is to find a “Win-Win”
- If overly collaborative may risk spending too much time on trivial matters. Collaboration takes time! Risk being taken advantage of.

The Collaborating Style

- Set aside their own goals in order to satisfy others
- Low assertiveness; Highly cooperative
- Value of Own Goal: **Low**; Value of Relationship: **High**
- Emphasis is on preserving the relationship, smoothing things out, harmony
- Accommodators often oppose change, like things to stay the same, demonstrate anxiety over the future.
- Are unassertive, may play the role of martyr, complainer, saboteur.

The Accommodating Style

- When problems arise, need to decide if the behavior warrants your intervention.
- Some behavior is bothersome but not disruptive
- Does the behavior affect fellow faculty? Students?
- If yes, base your intervention on observable behaviors
- In private, be specific in your description of the problem and explain how the observed behavior affects others
- Make sure prior to meeting that you PLAN.

Does the Chair Need to Intervene?

- Sharon is a young, tenure-track faculty member in her 4th year as an Assistant Professor. She isn't as productive as she could be. She loves to talk and visit with faculty, staff and students. She is often late to class because she is talking with others. She spends too much time in class discussing personal issues/stories and making friends with students. Student evaluations of her courses indicate students “like” Professor Sharon, that she cares about them, and is enthusiastic about teaching. Students report however, that she does not return assignments in a timely manner and feedback, although plentiful, is not helpful. Most students receive A's. Prof. Sharon is behind on a number of departmental projects. Furthermore, she personally drives you crazy. She talks too much in department meetings but rarely contributes anything of substance. Her long-winded explanations and constant agreements about wanting to change (but never doing so) are becoming a source of frustration for you and others in the department. She can become defensive and angry if confronted with criticism of her performance. In defense, she consistently reminds others how much students like her and that she never has trouble filling her courses.

Case Study #1

- Awareness – what are the issues on the surface of the conflict?
- Expectations – yours, Sharon's
- Needs & Wants – yours, Sharon's, the department's, university's?
- Emotions – what emotions might impact reactions?
- Conflict/Behavioral Styles – Differences? Similarities?
- Hot Button Issues – for you? For Sharon?
- Unresolved issues from the past?

Discuss the Following

- Identify/Define the problem
- Conduct background research
- Consider your intentions and goals
- What messages do you need to convey?
- Who will attend?
- Prepare your opening, the key points, and your closing remarks
- What follow up is necessary?

Plan the Meeting

- Professor Pam refuses to admit anyone can do anything as well as she can. Even tasks/assignments she has no interest in tackling she refuses to let others assume. When others do assume these responsibilities she is overly critical and is a consistent roadblock to their completion. She rarely gives in on her position and makes others feel stupid when they disagree or have an opposing opinion. When she does concede to the group, she constantly reminds the group of her concession and if things go wrong she never lets you, or the group forget. To make matters worse, if things go right, she takes all the credit. As a senior faculty member, you (the Chair) have asked her to mentor junior faculty; however, she prematurely forms opinions about new colleagues and will be overly condescending and/or ridicule them in front of others. New faculty have voiced their dissatisfaction with her as their mentor. You find it difficult to work with Pam because she frequently questions your decision making and/or she asks seemingly “innocent questions” that seem to be aimed at destroying your confidence and weakening your authority (e.g., “Are you certain this is the best course of action for our group?”; “Why should we follow this plan/procedure?”).

Case Study #2

- “Awareness – what are the issues on the surface of the conflict?
- Expectations – yours, Pam’s
- Needs & Wants – yours, Pam’s, the department’s, university’s?
- Emotions – what emotions might impact reactions?
- Conflict/Behavioral Styles – Differences? Similarities?
- Hot Button Issues – for you? For Pam?
- Unresolved issues from the past?

Discuss the Following

- Identify/Define the problem
- Conduct background research
- Consider your intentions and goals
- What messages do you need to convey?
- Who will attend?
- Prepare your opening, the key points, and your closing remarks
- What follow up is necessary?

Plan the Meeting

- Professor Jack is a tenured, Full Professor, who has worked in your department for 20 years. He has always been an “average” teacher. Over the past several years his teaching evaluations have been more negative. As Chair, you worked with him to try to address the specific issues identified in the evaluations. You suggested teaching workshops (offered to fund his participation), on-campus faculty development opportunities, and to help him find a “friendly and helpful” colleague to observe his classroom teaching (for developmental not punitive purposes). He did not take you up on any of these suggestions but did formulate some written goals that he stated he would work on. He thanked you for your interest in helping him improve. While the next semester’s evaluations showed some improvement, subsequent semesters have yielded evaluations identifying the same problem areas. Professor Jack is positive and states that he is motivated to change. He has a list of efforts that he says he has made to improve his teaching and states that he “can’t understand why his evaluations are negative”. Students have started complaining to you as the Chair.

Case Study #3

- “Awareness – what are the issues on the surface of the conflict?
- Expectations – yours, Jack’s
- Needs & Wants – yours, Jack’s, the department’s, university’s?
- Emotions – what emotions might impact reactions?
- Conflict/Behavioral Styles – Differences? Similarities?
- Hot Button Issues – for you? For Jack?
- Unresolved issues from the past?

Discuss the Following

- Identify/Define the problem
- Conduct background research
- Consider your intentions and goals
- What messages do you need to convey?
- Who will attend?
- Prepare your opening, the key points, and your closing remarks
- What follow up is necessary?

Plan the Meeting

- Operate from mission and values
- Evaluate yourself and your perceptions
- Listen
- Follow policy (if policy doesn't exist, create it)
- Build trust with colleagues
- Clarify expectations and consequences
- Take appropriate action

(Crookston, R. Kent, 2010)

Dealing with Faculty

7 Essential Steps

- This presentation focused on faculty difficulties rooted in the professional environment
- Some faculty have more serious difficulties: substance abuse problems, clinical depression or anxiety, physical ailments, chronic health issues, etc.
- Most of us are not trained in counseling, psychotherapy, or medicine.
- Need to refer to an appropriate source of help
- Referrals must be made carefully
- Reach out for help when you are over your head

More Serious Faculty Difficulties



Share the Profile of Your Difficult Faculty Member

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