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Taking On Unexpected Leadership Roles

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In the summer of 2015, I was unexpectedly asked to take on the role of Department Chair of the Humanities, Social Science, and Communication department at my university. This was a job that was not even on my radar. I was completely unfamiliar with the position and very nervous about taking on the role. During this proposed session, I will present some concrete tips to help individuals taking on unexpected leadership roles survive and eventually thrive in the position. I will solicit feedback and advice from others that have been in similar positions.

In my experience, success in unexpected leadership roles depends on two things: cultivating positive relationships and finding mentorship.

The first thing I did after my new role was announced was to meet individually with each of the full time faculty members. Through these meetings, I wanted to obtain an understanding of their views of the strengths and areas of need both for themselves and the department. The faculty members that I very recently saw as mentors or peers were now my colleagues. Listening to each faculty member share their concerns built a strong relationship on a new level. I learned to assume the best of people and give them the freedom to be creative and productive. I was able to say yes to several ideas from faculty members that were cost neutral and increased the visibility of our department. These simple decisions allowed me to quickly increase morale after a long period of departmental stagnation.

Mentorship can come in a variety of forms and each chair will need to find their own appropriate mentor. When faced with a new and unclear situation it's essential that a novice chair reach out for help. It's important to have at least one mentor who has been in a role similar to yours, but other leaders whose style you value can also be helpful. The person I would consider my official mentor is a former department chair who has gained respect and admiration from peers and subordinates through his leadership style and has a strong understanding of the politics of the university. Even though I had an official mentor, people from all divisions of my university were willing to help when I reached out and it was a great way for me to get to know people whose names I knew, but had never met.

Building positive relationships and seeking out appropriate mentorship allowed me to be successful in my unexpected leadership role and could help others in similar situations. I also look forward to hearing what others have done to be successful in their new roles.