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From Without and Within: Challenges of Assuming Leadership

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Attending the Academic Chairpersons Conference several years ago, these presenters engaged in workshops and gathered information that has been useful in their positions as mid-level management in their public, regional university. Another important component, however, was building a relationship of support with each other.

Assuming a position of leadership can be anxiety-provoking, but being promoted from within the university versus being hired from the “outside” creates different challenges. This workshop will focus on helping attendees navigate the particular challenges of their own situation by providing ideas on building support systems whether they were promoted “up the chain” within their current setting, or were recruited from outside into a position of leadership. One presenter has moved up the academic ladder from within the University, while the other was recruited and brought into the University as a Department Chair.

Using a sticky-note exercise, the presenters will ask participants to share, anonymously, situations in which they feel they have received little support, or in which their circumstances (relating to being promoted from within or brought in from the outside) have impacted their leadership. We will focus on specific situations or challenges as shared by the participants in this exercise (with some “just-in-case” scenarios that the presenters have experienced). The presenters will then take these shared situations, categorize them, and will use these in a group exercise to come up with concrete ways to address the circumstance. The purpose of the sticky-note exercise is to elicit discussion and engage in problem-solving. While the presenters are categorizing responses, participants will engage in a hands-on exercise of mind-mapping to identify their own challenges. We will use the maps, with the group, to brainstorm solutions.

When you are promoted from within an organization, you may be supervising former colleagues, and now find yourself in the role of “boss”, having to evaluate and, perhaps, remediate behaviors. A shared history can create challenges in changing roles. Depending on the relationship with your once colleague, you may have shared personal experiences, engaged in activities together outside of work, and may have to forge new boundaries. On the other hand, if you are recruited from outside the university, you may not be supervising former colleagues, but you may be viewed with suspicion, anger and resentment. You do not have the context of the institutional history to guide you, and you have no built-in “safe zones”. This workshop will explore various strategies of coping with either situation along with brainstorming ways to build support, focusing on the needs of the audience.

This presentation shares experiences in leadership at a regional university (from two perspectives, promoting from within and without) and how they built support systems to navigate changes. In a highly interactive format, participants will help guide the direction of the workshop.