

Bridging Departmental Divides

Information compiled from presentations given by Professors Michael Brown, Barbara Wakimoto, Mani Soma, Mimi Kahn, and Ken Clatterbaugh at previous ADVANCE and LCVI/ADVANCE Quarterly Leadership Workshops. See www.engr.washington.edu/advance/workshops for the original presentations.

Consider the following hypothetical worst-case dept which has excellent people who won't work together. In this department there is a lack of trust and respect. Faculty have difficulty identifying with institutional goals and have a "tit for tat" mentality. Dialogue tends to focus on departmental history (circa 1957) rather than the future of the department. Conversations are prone to conspiracy theories and have a victim mentality. The "inside-the-box" thinking perpetuates the status quo. Unsupported "conventional wisdom" claims are frequently made. Some of the consequences of this environment is new faculty become conditioned by the environment. Those that might bring new perspectives to the department self-select out. Shared implicit beliefs are reinforced and the environment is not suitable to fostering participation by underrepresented group. What is a chair to do?!

What a chair can do

- Create an environment where positive behavior is more probable
- Persist, realizing that change is (surprisingly) hard and permanent change will not happen instantly
- Promote open and transparent processes
- Identify and tackle long-festering issues. Prioritize these issues and consider the timing.
- Take care in staffing key departmental committees because the right person can make a world of difference
- Present a framework for dealing with the issue at hand and a desired timeline for your faculty
- Recognize that people are the key
- Communicate clearly and openly
 - Take your message one-on-one, avoid email
 - Use neutral ground
 - Allow time for processing
 - Seek the opinions of all involved, not just the "inner circle"
 - Emphasize the importance of respecting all opinions
 - Use your influence to make certain that individuals are not marginalized in the process – remember that the chair sets an example and a tone in meetings.
 - Offer unrequested assistance. Break cycle of "what incentive is there for me to help"
 - Have message of institutional goals
 - Use different strategies for different faculty types (e.g. too interested, disinterested, too busy)
 - Remember that open communication and flexibility of the leader are key
 - Don't rush a vote until all stake-holders have had ample opportunity to participate

- Consider different sides of the issue
 - Find someone who thinks differently
 - Present all aspects (think of as many as you can) fairly
 - Minority views inform the process and lead to significant revision
- Discuss ideas, suggestions, disagreement, etc. based on the issue, not on personality
- Listen and be willing to change/modify
- Remember it's sometimes better to be collegial than to be right
- Foresee problems before they erupt ... a problem is brewing if individuals come to you and complain about colleagues, conversations occur behind closed doors, and/or colleagues are being marginalized
- Focus on the positive and collaborative
- Remind individuals of their common interests
- No matter what size boat you are rowing, everyone has to pull together
- Model the behavior you want others to adopt
- Design ways for people to lean about one another
- Prepare to "fall on your sword"
 - A chair's enthusiasm may not always carry a battle
 - Sometimes better to back off a divisive issue