

You Can't Do It All: Delegating

by Christian Hansen

Almost every issue to be acted on by a department is brought to the department chair, but it is not the chair's job to act on every issue alone. Rather, it is the chair's responsibility to route each particular issue to the appropriate person or committee—in other words, to “direct the traffic.” The single largest time management issue of most new department chairs is that they do not have a good sense of which issues to handle themselves and which issues to defer or delegate to someone else. There are two types of issues that we need to be concerned about: decisions and tasks.

Delegating and Referring Decisions

Many of the decisions a department chair must make are related to budgets. Routine budget decisions regarding faculty travel and minor purchases for which a budget has been set aside or a policy exists should be made by the chair with minimal consultation with others except (if necessary) the staff person in charge of maintaining the department budget. When requests for funds exceed available funds, the chair may want to consult a planning committee or even the department as a whole in establishing funding priorities. The larger the funds being requested and the larger the gap between what is being requested and what is available, the greater the need for the chair to consult others before a decision is made. Budget decisions should not be made simply on the basis of equality. Rather, decisions should be based on established goals and objectives for the department. Such decisions usually involve subjective judgment and may cause negative reactions in the department if there is a perception that the chair is making too many unilateral decisions without consult-

ing faculty. But what does this have to do with time management? This is in fact a major time issue, and one for which the best practices appear to be somewhat counterintuitive. Delegating decisions to others initially takes *more* time than simply making the decision alone. But the time it consumes later having to deal with conflicts that may result from the chair's making decisions without consulting others usually far exceeds the extra time it takes to consult. Which decisions can be made by the chair alone and which should be referred to others vary greatly from department to department. A seasoned chair who has developed solid trust with his or her colleagues will be expected to make more decisions alone than a new chair.

Delegating Tasks to Faculty

In principle, everything can be delegated. A chair should never fall into the trap of thinking that there are certain tasks that only he or she is capable of doing. If you as department chair are working many more hours than your faculty colleagues, that may be an indication that you are not delegating enough. Following is a list of tasks that may be delegated to faculty rather than being handled by the chair; keep in mind that this may vary from department to department.

- Curriculum development, including the development of new courses and programs
- Drafting a policy for department discussion
- Mentoring new faculty and graduate students
- Conducting faculty searches
- Student recruitment and outreach efforts

When delegating tasks to faculty, focus on desired outcomes rather than

on methods. Faculty are professionals like you; they are not your hired help. When delegating a task to a faculty member, be sure to discuss the following matters:

- *Authority:* Who is responsible for the final decision if the task involves one?
- *Resources:* What budget or staff resources are available to support this task?
- *Time line:* When is this due?
- *Status reporting needed:* What milestones, if any, will be reported on along the way?
- *Accountability:* What are the incentives for doing this and the consequences for not doing it?

Faculty members are generally very good at saying no. Everyone understands their freedom to choose, and delegating a matter does not happen just by forwarding the issue to a faculty member. Delegation in academia usually happens through the process of negotiating.

Delegating Tasks to Staff

Much of the classic time management literature has made the suggestion that a manager or executive is only as good as his or her staff. The same holds true for department chairs. Staff, good or bad, can make or break a department chair. If you have been blessed with dedicated and competent staff, treat them well and express your gratitude to them every day. If you have staff that in spite of every effort you have made are not able or willing to improve, you must face the battle of getting rid of them. Firing a staff member is generally a difficult and time-consuming process that will involve the support of both your dean and your faculty colleagues.

Treating staff well is not just a matter of thanking them and nominating them for awards. They must be empowered and inspired to seek their highest potential and feel that they make a valuable contribution to your department and institution. As with faculty, delegate tasks with steward-

ship. Focus on results rather than on methods, and clarify authority, resources, time line, milestones, and accountability. In some cases, breaking a larger project into smaller tasks may be helpful; in other cases, it is better to let the staff member establish the tasks. Other recommendations in working with staff include the following:

Be a resource. Frequently ask your staff for suggestions on things that could make their job more effective. Don't just assume that they will ask if there is something they need. If a new piece of equipment, new furniture, or a training seminar is the answer, make it a priority to find the funding to provide it. Such investments usually pay off many times.

Hire student employees. Students can bring substantial value to a department. Students offer inexpensive assistance, and they are usually eager for the opportunity to gain professional experience while making money to support their studies. But be sure to delegate the responsibility of hiring and supervising your student employees to a trusted staff member. Student employees will require more supervision than your staff, but like staff, student employees should be gradually delegated more and more tasks with stewardship. You may even be able to hire students who possess talent that can be valuable to the department beyond just making photocopies and running errands. For example, a computer science major may be able to help maintain your department's website and perform basic maintenance of your department's computers. An English or journalism major may be able to help proofread letters or reports for you.

Plan ahead. Protect your staff's time in the same way that you want to protect your own. Secretaries do not like having stuff dumped in their lap at the last minute. Planning ahead for deadlines and major projects that need staff support will make their job much easier and more time effective.

Be flexible. Secretaries need their vacations and personal leave, and term breaks can be a difficult time for them to take time off. Be accommodating when they request leave, even if the timing is not convenient for you. There is almost never a good time for you to be without your key staff, so unless the request for leave is clearly unreasonable, you should give priority to accommodating your staff's needs for leave.

Delegating Acting Chair Responsibilities

On occasions when the department chair will be on vacation or attending a conference, it may be necessary to appoint an acting chair to perform all the functions of the department chair in his or her absence. Handing over signing authority to someone else requires substantial thought. Who in your department has developed the necessary trust with you and the department and has the right qualifications to be suitable for this very demanding assignment? There are three types of people that naturally come to mind: an associate chair, a former chair, and a potential future chair.

If your department is large enough to have an associate chair, that would be someone you already have a trusted relationship with and typically a person who already knows the operating procedures around your office. Also, particularly in departments that use a rotating department chairship, it is likely that there are one or more former chairs among the faculty. There may even be some that are emeritus faculty who are still active in the department and willing to step in on your behalf for a few days. Being a former chair, however, does not make everyone a prime candidate for this assignment. You would want to choose someone who is trusted not just by you but by the department in general. Only someone who left the chair position in good standing should be considered.

A third possibility is a faculty member in your department who you would support as a potential replacement for yourself if and when you step down. In fact, that might be the best choice of all because appointing a prospective future chair as acting chair gives the person an opportunity to learn about your job and gradually become socialized into the position.

Regardless of which of the three types you choose, you will need to have your candidate for this assignment identified soon after you take on the chair position. Once you have selected a person who is able and willing to serve as acting chair when called for, discuss your choice with your dean. That way, should the dean have any objections to your choice, it can be discussed before the actual situation arises, and the dean will know whom to appoint in the unfortunate event that illness or an accident prevents you from making the temporary appointment yourself. Whenever possible, you should select the same person each time you are away.

Once you have made the choice, take advantage of each opportunity to try out the person by appointing him or her to serve even when you go on a short business trip for a day or two. That way, you will have a better chance to work out any problems before you have this person fill in for you for a longer period. Although you are appointing someone as the acting chair during your absence, it does not mean that this person will be performing all of the same duties that you normally would during the same period. Remember that this person is doing this on top of his or her regular duties, including a full teaching load. You should make every possible attempt to make the job of your acting chair as easy as possible. First, attempt to reschedule any important meetings you were scheduled to attend during your absence. For meetings you cannot reschedule, be sure to let others involved know that you will have

someone attend on your behalf. Check with your secretary to see if there are any critical items, such as a schedule proof, that needs to be signed before you leave or during your absence. If anything has to be signed while you are gone, discuss these items with your acting chair so that the responsibilities involved are clear. Discuss any foreseeable situations in which you would want to be consulted before an acting chair signs off, and unless you are on vacation, let your signee as well as your secretary know your schedule and when you will be able to check your voice and email messages.

Following a well-thought-out process when appointing an acting chair during your absence is crucial to time management. Having established expectations and responsibilities and discussed various “what if” scenarios saves time for everyone involved, and you will be able to rest easy knowing that you have left the department in good hands and that you will not face a time-consuming mess to clean up when you get home. ▲

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