



WHAT WORKS - A PKAL ESSAY

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD DEPARTMENTAL LEADERSHIP

By creating a coalition around issues relating to intellectual life and intellectual curiosity, an academic leader can help develop a broad commitment to a vision that links to greater institutional goals. From reading student newspapers, reports from academic committees, or the Chronicle of Higher Education, it is clear that what makes news on campuses today is not much different from that for the national scene: it is the thorny issues of change and conflict.

The keywords in headlines— unexpectedly, divide, stereotype, contend, relocate, frustrate— indicate the real sense of change occurring at our colleges and universities. They represent, however, not only crises but opportunities for change at both the institutional and the personal level.

Yet change is hard. In a book from JosseyBass, we find listed some thirty-three reasons for the resistance to change, ranging from feelings of satisfaction or fear to those of self-interest, futility, cynicism or myopia. The challenge to academic leaders, particularly those in formal positions as chairs or deans, is to overcome such resistance to the possibility of change by developing, communicating, and executing an academic vision.

Here is one illustration from my campus of how the actions of an effective leader can work to frame a positive environment for considering new opportunities, at the departmental or programmatic level.

In customary fashion, in early spring the dean solicited the thirty-six departments in our Arts and Sciences colleges for requests to undertake searches for new faculty appointments. Nearly 100 requests came back, each carefully justified on departmental needs. Through the process of getting these requests and setting the budget for the coming year, about one-fourth of the requests were approved. With few searches authorized, some chairs were angry and the process had the potential of bringing great harm to our academic community. However, through the leadership of the dean, the experience became a constructive one, rather than a destructive one.

He launched the fall with a retreat for chairs around the theme of 'time,' bringing the perspectives of each of the divisions (science, social sciences, humanities). The physics chair addressed the physics of time and the theory of relativity. The psychology chair, on the other hand, discussed psychological time and how internal sensations of time can be compared to the clock. Finally, the chair of art and art history explored time as a concept portrayed by visual artists. Following lunch, sessions from all divisions focused on how to increase intellectual development of faculty.

Comments from participants underscored the value of this coalition-building approach, and how effective the dean had been in bridging differences.

"I liked the division in the intellectual and practical discussions and found that the morning session gave me new insights into how other disciplines approach subjects. The afternoon was very stimulating in learning how others organize their disciplines and promote exchange.

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This essay emerged from Lee Willard's presentation at the 1998 PKAL Workshop— *Academic Leadership in a Time of Change: The Role of the Departmental/Divisional Chair.*



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It gave me ideas for what we might do differently in the drama departments. I'd be interested in continuing the practical section, maybe to talk about mentoring junior faculty or about how programs/departments have reallocated resources as they have responded to changes in their disciplines."

— *Chair of Drama Department*

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"My overall impression is laudatory. I thought the mix of the mind-expanding topic of 'time' with the practical realities of how to stimulate intra- and interdepartmental interactions provided an interesting contrast and potentially gave everyone a change to articulate his or her thoughts.

The subject of time proved good as a rallying point for discussion at our lunch table and the strategy that various departments use to motivate and focus cutting-edge intellectual issues might well prove useful down the line."

— *Chair of Botany Department*

The success of the retreat drew from several key features characteristic of good departmental leadership:

- ◆ the development of a shared purpose. The dean did not forget that it was interest in intellectual issues that had made these chairs faculty in the first place. Participants began to see that they had more in common than not.
- ◆ the importance and value of difference. Faculty also saw different perspectives on the same subject. 'Time' was different to the physicist and to the psychologist—and both were right.
- ◆ the value of peer learning. Faculty worked together in discussion sessions, learning from each other as equals.
- ◆ the importance of listening. The dean listened and was listened to.
- ◆ the importance of a new dynamic for departmental interactions. The dean provided a forum that brought a new dynamic into the interactions between departments.

While the leadership of the dean is the center of this story, the leadership characteristics displayed can be transferred to other settings. It is critical to note the importance of setting an example.

The dean modeled the behavior he wanted to encourage. He had a visible commitment to a greater institutional vision and was willing to invest personal time and energy in helping to change values and beliefs. He displayed skill in creating coalitions and fostering collaborations by communicating and connecting to faculty in new ways. ■