

Working With Difficult Faculty: Challenges for the Chair

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One reason being the Department Chair is the most difficult job in the university is working with difficult faculty and staff and their associated conflicts or problems. There is a line between ignoring and micro-managing both people and problems; however being proactive and managing both the people and problems is important to the success of your department. Being proactive includes initiating change rather than reacting to events and anticipating problems and their solutions in advance. Trying to control all the little things, micromanaging, is impossible and leads to a whole set of other issues such as loss of loyalty, focusing on the wrong priorities and de-motivation. As Chair you must focus on what you can control—your behaviors—and minimize the impact of difficult people. In other words, control what you can, be proactive in your planning, and minimize the negative impact of difficult people while maximizing their positive contributions.

The first section of this paper will identify the types of people who are problems and categorize problems or conflicts. The second section will focus on you; being proactive, planning to avoid or minimize problems. The final section will provide more strategies and emphasize why dealing with difficult people and problems is better than ignoring them.

Difficult People and Their Problems

A difficult employee may exhibit hostility, pessimism, chronic complaints, is too agreeable, or procrastinator; any of these in the extreme is a pain or a problem. Difficult people will likely fit into one of the labels Bissell (2003) provides:

- Bully—uses threats and intimidation, might makes right
- Complainer—portray themselves as victims, unable to solve problems
- Procrastinator—puts problems on back burner, let sleeping dogs lie
- Guerrilla Fighter—browbeat others using sarcasm and criticism
- Expert—often bright and right, but never wrong
- Icicle—freeze up at first sign of conflict.

Complainers who limit their complaints about the work place or colleagues are difficult enough; the problem can extend to external audiences which does more damage. The procrastinator may avoid work by shifting assignments to others or finding excuses for delays; associated problems can be sleeping on the job, not showing up for

work or doing non-work related activities at work. Another factor and cause of difficult faculty and staff is a poor fit such as expertise that is out-of-date or no longer essential to the unit.

Typically, the Chair is not the only one who finds these individuals difficult. Other faculty and staff do as well. Difficult people often have abrasive styles, blame others, like things as they are thus resist change, occupy your time and energy, blow things out of proportion, and are poor problems solvers. Using the list of characteristics associated with difficult employees, one or more types probably fits your problem maker to a tee. You may recognize others that didn't initially come to mind as difficult people, particularly the person who is too agreeable—more about them later. You are encouraged to separate the person from the behavior; with difficult people that is a challenge because what makes the person difficult is the consistent bad behavior! Certainly separating the person from the behavior in discussions with them is a good tactic.

Difficult people create problems or conflicts that fall into at least three categories; dire conflicts, chronic and efficiency problems. Myatt (2102) says “you can try to avoid conflict, but you can't escape conflict”. As a chair, part of your job is handling difficult employees and their inherent problems or conflicts. Managing conflict and difficult faculty effectively helps retain good faculty and staff. The worst outcome of difficult people and conflict is attrition of good people.

First, dire problems are situations that must be dealt with and usually involve major infractions of policy, safety, laws or local politics. Examples include discrimination based on gender, alcohol or drug use on the job, theft or making statements as a representative of the university that are not related to one's expertise. The good news is that often you will have help with these situations. Although sometimes you may have to gather information or make the first contact with the person to verify facts, legal or human resources may take over. However, their assistance maybe temporary and it is likely that you will deal with Dr. Dire on a long term basis. Suppose you are the only one who is aware (or cares) about the issues described above; beyond a moral imperative to act, doing nothing is the act of condoning and ultimately shifts someone else's bad act to you.

Second, chronic problems saturate most of the employee's work life. Examples include the pessimist who doubts every proposed change, is cynical about work, and/or enters each endeavor with a defeatist attitude; or the know-it-all who doesn't know-it-all who criticizes everything but has no suggestions to improve or replace the issue at hand. Collaborative work, faculty meetings and anytime this person is present tends to produce less because of one cynical, pessimistic or obtuse person!

Third, efficiency problems appear consistently in many settings but are easier to ignore. Examples include the person who seems agreeable and may serve but make no contribution, or serves and then quits or gives up. Fortunately, dire problems are infrequent,

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thus in terms of departmental progress the latter two—chronic and inefficiency—are more problematic because work is not completed in a timely way. Most departments are small with 20 or fewer faculty and even smaller numbers of staff positions. For a department with ten tenure and tenure track faculty and 20% service load each (the equivalent of 2 full time positions!) one chronic and two efficiency problems mean a loss of 60% service. That work is shifted to the others (so their service is now 28.5% each). Worse yet, the work may be shifted to you! Clearly the math can be applied across all three areas for faculty (teaching, scholarship and service). The end result is the same, either someone else fills the gap or the department is less efficient and bogged down. The same arithmetic can be applied to staff with similar results. Ignoring problems that impact work is a poor use of resources.

Any of the three conflicts described previously arrive at your door in one of two ways; via a third party or something you observe directly. You may see hostility or pessimism in a faculty meeting, as you observe teaching, or in interactions with office guests. If and how you deal with your direct observation depends on numerous factors. One is whether or not the incident “bubbles” up to a level that demands your attention; can you ignore it? Should you deal with it or must you deal with it? Clearly part of the answer is embedded in your values, and part in the other things competing for your time and attention. Some problems need immediate attention—all dire issues ought to be addressed immediately—but even some chronic and efficiency problems need immediate attention while others can wait. Problems that are likely to be repeated soon or issues of safety demand immediate attention. Problems and conflicts, like weeds in your flower garden, tend to grow when ignored. However, many problems are better handled after some careful thought, investigation and planning.

A conflict can also be brought to your attention through a complaint or comment by a student or another employee. When the conflict is brought to your attention, you may be forced to deal with the difficult person and in a timely manner (Figure 1). This situation is exacerbated when you have previously ignored the difficult employee, you may feel guilty or second guess yourself. Everyone (or anyone) knowing about previous bad behavior further exacerbates the current problem. Thus, it is good to deal with conflicts and the difficult employees in a timely and consistent way as problems arise. In other words, if it is a problem, deal with it.

It's All About You and Controlling What You Can Control

In this section the focus is on what you can do to prevent and control conflict, identify meanness, and consider ownership.

Chairs can control three of factors that promote conflict; emotions, communication and tolerance. Most people are concerned

about how our work is viewed and the factors that impact our work; especially when there is change or we lack information. The “me” factor is an emotional response based on the motivation for personal success. The person responds emotionally, often in an information vacuum, to competition, power struggles, merit issues and so forth trying to negotiate the best possible outcome for him or herself (Myatt, 2012). The “me” factor is likely intensified or even a causal factor in difficult faculty, but the “me” factor impacts everyone. One strategy to reduce the emotional or “me” response in all faculty and staff is to support everyone in reaching their professional goals. Through planning, establish clear paths to success for every person (“me”) in the unit. Moderating or eliminating emotional decisions is another strategy. Conflict is more likely when your decisions are made on an emotional basis; for example the Chair makes a decision based on liking or disliking a particular person rather than their merit, makes a decision based on feelings of guilt; or the difficult person responds to a situation based on emotions such as jealousy, fear or anger. This suggests that Chairs must be in control of their emotions and make data-based decisions in the best long term interest of the unit; both of these strategies are under your control. Second, presenting information effectively through clear, concise, accurate and timely communication is important. Emotions are elevated in an information vacuum. Finally, Chairs must be tolerant; demonstrate compassion, forgiveness, compromise and other selfless acts. Holding a grudge—even when well deserved—does not prevent conflict or make the difficult person less difficult. The point is that communication, data-based decisions and supporting success, and tolerance are under your control and are tools to prevent or moderate conflicts.

Modeling the following are acts of prevention, may mitigate problems and are best practices:

- Establish a climate of respect and open communication
- Develop and follow a procedure for appointments and meeting
- Find something to like and value in each person
- Have or find a sense of humor.

Publically state that you value respect and collegiality and how that looks to you; for example no cell phones during meetings, listening to all the voices while allowing time for everyone to speak, no “surprises” such as an email with the subject line “see me” (and no additional information), wise and considerate use of everyone’s time, and consensus building.

For meetings there should be an agenda. Similarly as individual meetings are scheduled with difficult people consider that even difficult people deserve to know what will be covered so the topics of discussion should generally be shared *a priori*. This goes both directions, you have the reasonable expectation of knowing why someone wants to meet with you. If a staff member schedules

Dealing With Difficult Faculty and Staff and the Conflicts They Create is the Chair's Job:

- Conflict impacts productivity of individuals and the unit
- Unresolved conflict may have a negative impact on retaining good faculty and staff

Figure 1 — It is best to deal with conflict and the difficult employees in a timely and consistent way as problems arise.

your meetings, have them gather or share enough information so everyone can be prepared. Frame this in the notion of respecting everyone's time and effort.

Prepare a list of something you like and/or value about each person, remind yourself of this before meeting with them; regularly let people know that you like them or at least what you value in them. Learn something personal about each person, especially the most difficult so you can have a pleasant conversation on a topic of interest. Be positive. A sense of humor and perhaps not taking yourself too seriously is another strategy, and perhaps a critical survival skill as a Chair dealing with difficult people.

Prevention is optimal, certainly better than ignoring conflicts created by difficult faculty and staff. Planning is important, even though conflicts and problems seem to erupt spontaneously. The "teachable" moment passes quickly and thinking after the fact "I wish I had done...". So, thinking about how to respond to a variety of situations *a priori* provides some tools just in case!

Consider and practice how you would respond to the following: a faculty member dominating the discussion in a meeting (how can you gently stop them and involve others), an employee making disparaging remarks about a colleague or student, or disregard for policy and/or procedures. Even as you hope these won't occur, an idea of how to handle a difficult person or conflict may transfer to other situations. For example, saying "let's focus on the issue and not each other" (focusing on the behavior not the person) or "I would like to hear what some others think" and if there is no public response "please feel free to email additional comments and I will share those ideas anonymously with the group". This series provides more detail about being a good Chair, certainly one way to reduce conflict is to follow best practices outlined in this series. However, even the best Chairs can have difficult faculty and staff. Prevention may reduce issues with faculty and even with difficult faculty; unfortunately prevention is not 100% effective. Some folks are just looking for a fight, and there are mean people.

Vaillancourt (2015) cautions that some mean people cannot be remediated. Chairs may feel too much has been invested to give up on the person, that there is a reason we hired this person and that should not be ignored, or meanness is based on insecurity so I should tolerate meanness. So, how do you recognize and measure meanness? She suggests you examine the reaction when you express your concern about the bad behavior. Regret, curiosity or surprise suggests a person who is unaware and perhaps redeemable while anger and defensiveness are markers of a mean person.

Hint #1. Prevent conflict by good communication, minimizing emotional decisions and reducing emotional responses, be tolerant, plan and follow procedures.

So, it is key to decide if this is a difficult employee who is creating conflict or a problem in your unit as opposed to a person who is being honest and trying to be helpful. To illustrate this situation consider that there are difficult employees who behave in a way that seems like "no problem" at all. These employees are completely agreeable (Tucker-Ladd, 1996). These employees agree with you (and everyone) all the time, as a chair it is tempting to like someone who agrees with you and assign a personality disorder to those who don't! Consider the fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen of the Emperor's New Clothes. The Emperor's ministers and towns people did not want to be labelled unfit or "hopelessly stupid" so they pretended to see clothes that were invisible to make the Emperor happy and stay in his good graces. The Emperor was duped by an unscrupulous pair of tailors who took advantage of his vanity. A

chair can tease out those "overly agreeable" employees by asking "how could (this) be better?" and seriously considering departmental dialog. A lack of suggestions to the question says something, is the employee afraid or incapable? Contrast this to the employee who maybe the "know it all" and really is. This person may have great ideas and be working in a sincere effort to help the department. Of course, they could be irritating and seem domineering or intrusive, but are they really difficult? Listening and remaining calm, even when confronted with a challenge by the "know-it-all" is important and may reap benefits to you and the department. The point is to be careful in determining whether the "expert" really is (or is not) an expert and how you can leverage their expertise with as little pain as possible. The point is to be certain that the difficulty is with the employee and not within you. The best chairs surround themselves with the smartest, most competent and caring people possible. Weaker chairs may select people who are agreeable and who boost their ego. Consider if the decision is evidence-based or emotional? Recall that the agreeable person may not contribute much to the mission beyond being agreeable.

Act Rather Than Ignore: Try These Additional Strategies

1. Time-out. Do not let yourself become trapped in a meeting unless you are prepared. After an altercation or problem, the difficult person may want to barge right into your office. A problem will rarely be solved under that circumstance. You need time to collect and evaluate information. The other person may need a bit of time to reflect (and perhaps cool down) before meeting. When cornered you might say "I want to discuss this with you, but we both need a bit of time to think this over. Let me look at my calendar and see what time we could meet tomorrow." This gives you time to prepare and consider the best approach.
2. Ask am I the best person to intervene? Should it be the Chair? Sometimes in conflicts between two faculty members, it may be best to see if they can work it out. If you ask them to work on the issue together, can they? Would it be better for them to discuss the problem with you present? If the problem is too difficult, maybe a counselor rather than the Chair is the best choice. As part of your planning and preparation, take a look at any relevant university policy. Is there a process you should follow, do you need to contact human resources for staff issues? In the remainder of the paper, I will assume the Chair is the best choice to solve the problem(s).
3. Develop and stick with a process in your meeting with difficult faculty and staff; be calm, listen and maintain eye contact. Depending upon the situation different approaches may apply. For example, in an extreme situation as the Chair you must be firm and identify the problem, why it is wrong and the potential outcomes. Among those are situations where policy has been clearly violated and there are legal ramifications such as physical fight or an inappropriate sexual relationship. The seriousness of those situations demands immediate, clear and chair lead discussion. Once again Bissell (2003) provides guidance for the Chair to lead the discussions as follows:
 - a. Identify the Emotional Climate. First, determine whether or not the person is angry about the situation. If so, you need to either calm them down or wait for a better time (not too long

though). Focus on the behavior and not the person; suggest that issues can become emotional, recognize their feelings and then focus on the facts and behavior. For example, you might say “this is difficult for both of us, how are you feeling right now?” If things start to ‘heat up’, agree that the discussion should stop for a few minutes. Sometimes it is better to say, “this is difficult for both of us right now; how about if we wait until tomorrow and restart the discussion.”

b. Identify the Problem. At the very beginning of the meeting both parties should be certain the problem is identified. While you may think you understand the problem, suggest she/he identify the problem in a few sentences. Unless the two of you can agree on the problem, there is no chance of reaching a solution. Javitch (2009) also recommends beginning the meeting by explaining its purpose and what the inappropriate behavior was. Then give the faculty or staff member a chance to explain their view of the issue. Once you have identified the issue(s), summarize; “we agree that ___ is a problem”. Emphasize that the goal of the meeting is to make things better.

c. Stay Focused on the Problem. Stay focused on the issues; do not drift away to ‘easier’ or unrelated topics. Sometime the person will hop around among topics. The Chair must make staying on topic the central issue. Do not allow the faculty or staff member to redirect the discussion to other unrelated issues. If you do, at the end of the meeting the main issues will not have been resolved. Regularly summarize, reiterate and return to the task; “at this point we have decided ...”, “we agree ___ must be changed”, or “we were discussing ___, let’s get back to that”.

d. Resist Placing Blame. Placing blame is not helpful. Whatever has happened has happened. The issue is to correct and solve problems, not to decide who caused the problem. Focus on the behavior or problem and not the person. Demonstrate tolerance (but not low standards of behavior).

e. Develop Alternatives. Developing alternative action plans is always a good idea. However, rather than the Chair offering alternatives, the best outcome is to get the faculty or staff member to do this. In fact having a selection of alternative actions is very helpful. Maybe you and the employee can discuss these and how other responses will result in less stressful situations. Javitch (2009) advocates for an approach that **helps the problematic employee to get back on track by discussing the problem behavior and how the person can avoid this situation in the future.** Again, emphasize your goal is to make things better.

f. Evaluate and Select from Alternatives. Practicing and role playing alternative behaviors is generally a useful process. Asking the faculty or staff member “what would be a good response if ___ occurred” or “can you think of other circumstances when this alternative might be helpful?” However, this requires preparation by the Chair before the meeting so that situations and alternative actions can be discussed. Consider how to deliver the message: “I appreciate the contributions you make to our department and want to see how we can work together to solve this problem, avoid future problems and most of all assure that you are successful.”

g. Be Clear about Procedure. Do not end the meeting until you and the faculty or staff member agree on appropriate actions:

- What are the steps to be taken?
- What are alternatives?
- Who will do what and when?
- How will you judge appropriate outcomes?

Unless these points and actions are understood and agreed to, plans for resolutions and improvements either will not happen or will not work. Either you or the faculty/staff member should summarize the meeting, what was learned, and how to move forward effectively. Vaillancourt (2015) provides the following short list for dealing with mean people; decisive action, establish expectations, clear consequences, timeline for improvement and if that fails, develop an exit strategy for the difficult person!

h. Evaluate the Success. Action plans must be evaluated to judge if they worked. You and the faculty or staff member must agree on how to fairly judge the plan, the execution of the plan and what that means. How long should it take? What are the markers of success and lack of success? Who will judge these makers? In other words, follow up.

Finally, do not ignore the problem. If the faculty or staff member adds value and potential to your unit, do not ignore the problem behavior—it will not go away—and productivity is reduced (Javitch, 2009; Myatt, 2012). Intervene as soon as possible, sometimes a person may not recognize that a behavior was inappropriate. However, most individuals know inappropriate behavior and may not be surprised if you ask to see them to discuss the problem. Putting this off can exacerbate the problem and make it more difficult to deal with later on (Javitch, 2009).

Remember dealing with difficult people is your responsibility as Chair. Difficult people can make work life intolerable for good people and encourage them to seek a better work climate. Most difficult people have a negative impact on the productivity of the unit; either they are not contributing fully or they interfere with the work of others. Focus on evidence-based decisions, remaining calm, communicating clearly, planning and preventing, following procedures, solving people problems and once solved letting the initial problem go.

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