



## Working Effectively with Your Dean or Department Chair

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We didn't have enough room in the book, *Designing Effective Teaching and Significant Learning*, for everything we wanted to share with faculty. We are including this additional chapter to assist you with your professional development.

### Outcomes

Our hope is that, by the end of the chapter, you will be able to:

- Analyze the current relationship with the dean/chair.
- Identify strategies for working closely with the dean/chair.
- Empathize with the work the dean/chair does.
- Develop strategies to best work with the program/department dean/chair.

### Points to Ponder

In thinking about your professional development, consider the following questions to examine:

- How productive is the relationship you currently have with your dean/chair?
- What are the duties you aware of that your dean/chair performs?
- How can you build a relationship to better demonstrate your work as a faculty member?
- How can you inform and engage the dean/chair in your work in and out of the classroom?

The phone rang in my office and it was a rare occasion; I was there to answer it. A faculty member wondered if I was available for a quick conversation. I told her I was and she said she would be there in 5 minutes. I had just enough time to heat my lunch in the microwave down the hall and get back in time to talk. As I got back to my desk a knock at the door meant a working lunch. I knew I had 15 minutes before my next appointment when the faculty member started telling me she just landed a major corporate partnership agreement for her program. A Fortune 100 company wanted to partner with her program for employee training. This relationship is something she had been working on for some time, and over my jambalaya, I heard more about this monumental achievement.



The corporate partner wanted to discuss providing workshops and training sessions at the college due to the work we had been doing on securing 3D design software. They chose to partner with our 2-year institution was offering a more advanced program than the 4-year institutions in our city. Our AAS graduates were getting hired with comparable BA graduates. This work as done between faculty member and me to be recognized as a destination program. One of my faculty colleagues often talked about how his role was to “help his boss look good.” It wasn’t just lip service, and I adopted the philosophy. I also think it is the bosses job to make employees look good. A philosophy that talking with whomever you are speaking with is the only thing you have to be doing at that time is key. That rarely happens, but being present with the people you are working it is important to the relationship that you have with them. It is what gets you through the difficult work. Getting to share in news like this is one of the best parts of my job.

## **The Best Relationship You Need**

The relationship you have with your dean or chair can be one of the most rewarding in your work. However, it can also be one of the most complex. A successful partnership with your dean or department chair will offer you many opportunities to advance in your career. However, some deans or department chairs are mysterious. We have seen faculty trying to crack the code to better understand what their supervisor is thinking.

Deans and department chairs don’t usually try to portray an all-powerful image to impress you when in reality it is a more timid person hiding behind a curtain. However, most of us have, at times, experienced those types. Supervisors are human. They can be great leaders or at times, barriers to success. It is our experience, that most of them are there to support you, your teaching, and career. They have difficult decisions that need to be made and usually the demands of the job offers them little free time to communicate their thinking. Often you seen only the results of these decisions so it takes a great deal of understanding to know how they do their job.

As a dean, I learned that I needed to listen more and then speak strategically. In the words of Stephen Covey (2019), “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” It seems as though many people spend more of their time telling and less time listening and understanding. “Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply (Covey 2019).” We have created cultures of telling people what we think first. Speaking strategically doesn’t mean watching every word you say. It means speaking with intention. It can include asking deeper questions, using compassion, setting tone, and offering direction. The lesson I take from this, is to let the people I work with tell me what they want to tell me. I get a better understanding of what they need first before responding. Listening to others gives me a chance to prepare my comments and helps me speak strategically.



As a new dean, I was intrigued with how faculty introduced themselves to me. I noticed that I had many appointments showing up on my calendar. Most of these meetings were from adjunct or part-time faculty who wanted to market themselves so as I assigned courses for the next semester, they would have work assignments. This is completely understandable.

One of the things that I noticed at the two institutions I served as a dean was that the sooner adjunct faculty made the appointment, the greater the urgency they felt they needed to make this appointment. During the first semester I worked with them I drew a correlation between the “earliness” of the appointment and their ability to teach. Those who tended to get more student complaints or had other issues in the classroom and with other faculty in the department were the first in line at my door. I saw that they wanted to make their case and present themselves in their own light versus having me hear things about them from others. I made sure that I got in to see these faculty teach in the first few weeks of the semester.

The dean or department chair can serve as the coach of a team much like the director of the band. As I was a high school band director, let me use this analogy. In any high-performance organization, you have strengths and weakness that you need to analyze and improve. The overall ensemble can't be exemplary unless the director has the vision to develop the musicians by providing them with quality learning experiences. Supervisors need to identify the challenges that need to be addressed or the ensemble will suffer. In such a public setting, deficiencies will become apparent to many soon enough. Instead of teaching students, deans and department chairs are teaching faculty. Having a background in faculty development helps to provide timely opportunities to improve performance which in turn, would offer better experiences for student learning and collegial relationships.

### **Deans and Department Chairs as Middle Managers**

It is important to remember that deans and department chairs make many important decisions. However, they don't do this in a vacuum. They need to weigh their decisions with the expectations and policies of their supervisors: vice-presidents and president. This is important to remember as you analyze the decisions affecting your work. Your supervisor may not be able to do anything immediately about a situation. Institutional change often takes a great deal of time. Supervisors may agree with you, but are unable to make the change happen without much preparation as they present the case to their supervisors.

Known pervasively as the middle managers of higher education, the dean serves as both the catalyst and conduit for the information, resources, and [yes] challenges that emanate from all sides of the academic corridor in moving the school, students, and faculty to various levels of achievement and accolade. Put another way, the academic dean necessarily makes many moves on a complicated



playing field in advancing the work of the school. Senior administration, department chairs/conveners, faculty, and students all have and expect both immediate and on-going access to the dean (Williams, 2017).

There are many moving parts within an institution. Many of these parts move behind the scenes so employees aren't aware of most of them. In addition, many of the reasons for decisions may not be able to be communicated so what may seem like inaction, is a complex situation which can take a long time to see results. The supervisor can frame a context in which the idea could advance. Where many employees may think their needs are the most important, they may actually be very low on the list of immediate concerns. Many employees won't know what that list consists of or where they fall in the priorities que. This doesn't mean that an individual's need isn't important, it just isn't *as* important. "Most academic deans face a great deal of criticism for not being able to sufficiently placate the dreams and wishes of everyone within the state of the realities that attend the life of the academy (Williams, 2017, para. 3)."

This is why it is critical to frame the thinking behind your ideas and needs in a way that makes it easier for your dean to respond. Don't say you have a problem. Communicate that you have a need or concern and provide some solutions as well. Keep in mind that supervisors who respond to each individual problem will soon burn out. Understand that they need to organize their work in a way to work on bigger items impacting many and may not have much of their time to work on smaller, more individual items.

## **Understanding Your Supervisor**

In their book, *Seasons of a Dean's Life*, Gmelch, Hopkins and Damico state: "Institutions of higher education require an increasingly strong leader, task that leader with an ever-broadening range of responsibilities, and are perpetually less explicit in terms of their concrete expectations of that leader" (p. 7)

Adopting the *seek first to understand* (Covey, 2019) philosophy will help you identify the many roles your supervisor has and the responsibilities to which they are held accountable. We have included a partial list of what deans and department chairs need to do:

- Budgeting,
- supervising and evaluating faculty and staff – at times over 100 people,
- managing promotion and tenure,
- leading multiple departments,
- monitoring course enrollment,
- measuring and analyzing degree completion,



- recruiting and hiring quality, diverse faculty,
- managing faculty and staff discipline,
- participating in student discipline and addressing student concerns,
- providing faculty development opportunities,
- nurturing community partnerships,
- communicating with multiple audiences via email, phone, letters, in-person
- motivating hundreds of faculty and students (perhaps thousands),
- designing strategic and improvement plans,
- representing the institution at events,
- maintaining positive relationships with business and industry partnerships and community and legislative organizations,
- raising money from partnerships and finding grants,
- ensuring programs meet accreditation requirements,
- assessing multiple criteria of outcomes, courses, institutional outcomes,
- and fulfilling other duties as assigned!

It is a busy job as anyone can see. At any one time there can be 15 high priorities demanding a supervisor's time. Supervisors and faculty have that in common – doing everything they can to keep advancing the items on the priority list. Here is how one former dean shares his experience.

I would walk into a meeting more or less knowing who would be there, with what issues, and with what desired outcomes. Then someone else would show up. Or a new bit of information about budgets would be mentioned. Or a different idea would emerge. And I would have to pivot and decide: Was this new development important? Should we discuss it more? Should I steamroll ahead with my original plan or refocus? How will my actions be perceived by, and affect, the president, provost, department chairs, faculty, administrative staff, students, their parents, community partners, and key donors. (Did I leave anybody out?) How might it play out on social media or in the local press? (Butin, 2016)

Most faculty participating in the same meeting may only be thinking about how their leader will respond to the meeting's content. Knowing that the supervisory is balancing all of these thoughts will be helpful to understand the way in which they think based on their level of experience as a dean. As presented by Gmelch et.al, a dean's experience level is defined as being in the spring (years 1-3), summer (years 4-7) and fall (years 8 and beyond). The development of the dean will have a different focus on each of these seasons (2011). Much of the same occurs for faculty. It is important to consider where your dean or department chair is at in their own development as you determine how they can support your needs. And keep in mind, that your dean receives very little professional development on how to be a leader.



A dean's leadership development trek is an inner journey. Self-knowledge, personal awareness, and personal corrective feedback must be part of a dean's progression through the seasons of his or her career. Moral, ethical, and spiritual dimensions need to be included in the dean's travel pack. They are necessary components for any successful dean to complete the trek (Gmelch, Hopkins and Damico, 2011).

You are important to your dean or department chair. These leaders need your independence and your input. They also need your compliance for the good of everyone and the institution. You won't often have much free time to discuss things with your supervisor so it is important that you document your work and provide updates when possible. Excellent leaders want to know how you are doing, how your students are doing, They should read course survey results to understand the student experience in your courses and what kinds of professional development your institution can offer to improve your teaching skills.

Many supervisors want to champion and cheerlead for you. They want to boost you and deeply appreciate when you do the same for them. A bit of a mutual admiration society keeps everyone motivated. Deans want to make faculty look good too, and at the same time, need to make their own bosses look good. Tight communication timelines can put pressure on the relationship so it may not seem like they appreciate your work.

Each faculty member is unique, much like the students you see in your courses. Each person has different needs and motivators. As a supervisor, it is up to the dean, and the faculty member to develop a strong working relationship that is fair for each, and fair to all. There is a set of standards that all faculty need to follow and yet, the working pathway needs some individualization. This balance is difficult to achieve. Keep in mind that faculty have one dean and deans can have over 100 employees with over 100 unique personalities with unique strengths and ways they are best motivated.

Have you ever observed a child's birthday party? Children tend to compare the number of candies in a cup, the size of the piece of birthday cake on a plate and will choose punch based on which cup looks like it has more. For children, motivators come down to which is bigger, the favorite color, or might provide the most fun. In low-performing organizations, it can be much the same. As a faculty member, it is important to realize that your dean is trying to treat everyone fairly within institutional expectations, but needs some latitude to meet individual employee needs. Everyone is in a different place on their career journey. In high-performing organizations, there is no comparison to the above analogy. What you see instead is a professional trust and transparent dialogue. Each partner in the relationship tends to be open minded and realizes that soon their needs will be met.

There are times when working with your dean is extremely difficult due to the amount of work and variety of personalities. Faculty can design their courses so there is a lot of structure



for students to learn. A dean or department chair needs to provide structure for faculty; however realize that faculty enjoy a certain amount of autonomy. Nobody likes to be micro-managed. At any one time, your dean probably has four or more issues going on based on the list of duties and needs to be meeting the needs of just as many faculty. Many times, they have five or more meetings on different topics from different departments while working with many faculty and a number of staff. This is similar to full-time faculty who juggle several courses, 100+ students with many learning needs, committee responsibilities, administrative requests and more.

The key to the relationship you have with your dean or department chair is understanding the roles that you both play individually and the interaction you have with one another. So what can you do to build a great relationship with your supervisor?

- Be organized. When they request information, respond as quickly as you can. That buys you a great deal of rapport. When you are the faculty member who always helps the dean/chair, you help to build a pipeline the supervisor will try to return the favor. If you need more time to get them what they need, keep the dean/chair updated via a brief, concise email.
- Be proactive: If there is a problem, suggest a solution while you are presenting the challenge. Help them be their best and do their best thinking.
- Support your leader, so they can support you. If you are going to a conference, present all of the costs and rationale so they can sign off on it without having to revisit it. Occasionally send them an email about bigger events you doing with your students.
- Keep meetings on time. Start and keep the conversation about what you need to cover. Help your supervisor stay on schedule.
- Develop a portfolio of your teaching and professional development experiences to demonstrate the quality work you performing.
- Anticipate the leader's needs. When you have an idea, formulate it, provide the problem/solution, research opportunity details, and deliver the data. Deans/chairs vary on how involved want to or can be in the planning of your project idea. Test your thoughts with others first before presenting it so you can answer the questions that need answering. Ask yourself, what you would need to be able to grant permission or advance this idea.

Developing and maintaining a professional relationship with supervisors can advance your work while showing both empathy and humanity. Some leaders are better at this than others. If your supervisor isn't warm and friendly, find out what works by talking with the administrative assistant. This person works with the supervisor all the time and may give you a better insight than anyone else.



Leaders' minds are often in a problem solving/solution finding mode for most of the day. As stated before, your supervisor is challenged with many problems in a day, and will respect you more if your mindset matches. That doesn't mean that the dean or department chair doesn't appreciate kindness. Sometimes they can use a good laugh as well. Experience will tell you when that is appropriate. All of us feel like we do a thankless job at times. As faculty, you get to enjoy the interaction with your students and watching them learn. Leaders who were excellent faculty may appreciate the same with their faculty and staff.

## **Sharing Your Work with Your Supervisor**

### *Professional Development*

Faculty need to grow to remain current. A leader should encourage faculty to take advantage of professional development opportunities with professional organizations and associations. Most faculty need to choose between discipline-related and teaching and learning conferences. Which is more important? That is a trick question as they both are. Faculty ought to be supported in participating in their professional associations to remain current in the program/department skills. Students need to learn about the latest developments in their career field. Faculty internships and participating in conferences sharing current research, information, techniques and strategies. Establishing advisory boards assists faculty and the dean or department chair an opportunity to converse with leading employers in the community.

Talking with your supervisor about your professional development plan and funding for your ideas is key to developing your relationship. Decide on the conferences that will help you most. If you are strong in your discipline and have less experience in teaching, then connect with a teaching and learning conference where you can learn from your peers. Investigate what teaching and learning help is available on your campus. Ask your supervisor which opportunities may strengthen you most in your need areas. Your supervisor should know who has strengths in the areas you need growth and can help you connect to have deeper conversations.

### *Classroom Management*

Who are the faculty on campus who have been recognized for great classroom management? As a newer faculty member, you probably haven't had the time or experience to fully develop these skills yet. Many newer faculty are relying on teaching the way they were taught. Classroom management balances student learning and behavior, learning flow and success, managing relationships, identifying student needs, and developing strong skills in students who will demonstrate the reputation of your program/department. Your students will be assessing your classroom management skills through course-end evaluations. Read them and use them as growth opportunities. Be proactive and talk with your supervisor about resources on campus to help you learn more.

### *Develop Active Teaching Partnerships*

It is important for the dean or department chair to know what you are doing in your courses. Most of them have taught, so they are interested in seeing you interact with your students. An active teaching partnership can be developed with your supervisor who will have limited time so asking about other quality faculty who can mentor and share ideas is advisable. Institutions have developed a faculty performance assessment process to measure their teaching effectiveness. Become familiar with the components and look at this evaluation as a growth opportunity. In addition to classroom observations, invite your supervisor to stop in when your students are presenting summative assignments or delivering hands-on demonstrations. Keep in mind that good teaching isn't about dog-and-pony shows or a lesson filled with bells and whistles. Too much sparkle glosses over good teaching and learning and may be a distraction to students. Perhaps they had fun, but did they learn. As a dean, I could see excellence in a solid teaching presentation, designed active learning, deeper-learning questioning, and student participation. Share your students' learning success with your supervisor. Most leaders will appreciate being in the classroom again. They make decisions effecting faculty and students daily. Seeing this interaction in the classroom helps everyone remember why they are doing the work their role requires.

### *Designed Campus Discussions of Teaching and Learning*

Hopefully your dean or department chair realizes that a framework for discussions of teaching and learning is a critical part of the job. Student retention and degree completion are two huge measures for an institution's success. Institutions are focused on the *business of learning*. In business, research and development and product development are critical. Programs and departments need continuous improvement to remain current. Faculty discussing their work with one another find better ways to meet the diverse needs of learners and the design of courses and learning environments. Discussions about assessment at the course and program/department level are critical so plans are developed to measure achievement. Within a master academic plan a template for focused assessment of outcomes and the work to be completed needs to be in place for it to happen. Regular program or department meetings need to be scheduled to facilitate these conversations. The dean or department chair can share the best-practices from other departments since they attend a variety of similar meetings and can act as a communication hub. Using this strategy help to build consistency and to share best practices which will help all programs or departments grow.

### *Strategic Planning Meetings*

Supervisors and faculty can work collaboratively on course scheduling and workloads, budgeting, program/department assessment and accreditation, and external partnerships. Clear expectations of what is needed and the timeline for completion helps everyone succeed. Working together helps timely completion to meet the expectations.

### *Mentorship*

Faculty-to-faculty mentorship can be guided by your supervisor. It is rare that a leader with 100 employees would have the time and as the supervisor for faculty, it wouldn't be appropriate outside of the framework of professional development program encouragement. The supervisor has responsibilities to assist faculty in getting the resources. Gaining advice from your supervisor about how to handle a challenging student or difficult learning situation is certainly appropriate. Leaders know a lot of secrets and their ability to keep information confidential can be helpful in guiding you where to go to help answer your questions. They can direct mentorship opportunities such as teaching circles and more learning that you can obtain from your faculty-led teaching and learning center.

### **Final Thoughts**

Have you ever considered being a dean? The best estimates of the average lifespan of a dean is three to four years. The reasons for this include the following.

1. Faculty try being a dean and return to the classroom.
2. The work is exhausting.
3. Middle management is difficult.
4. Successful deans advance.
5. Many of these positions are set up to fail. They are at times a catch-all position needing better structure with clear goals.
6. There is very little professional development support for deans and department chairs.

Experiences with your dean or department chair will, in most cases be infrequent so value the time you get and appreciate the opportunities as they are presented.

1. Value the compliments you receive and make them last. You may not receive many of them due to time. Whether a quick comment, email, or personal note many achievements are noticed and hopefully your supervisor is good at acknowledging them.
2. Keep your supervisor informed. If there is a challenge that you need, or may need, their help with, let them know upfront. It is easier for them to work with facts, knowing that something may be coming their way.
3. Supervisors receive little positive news during the day. They are presented problems hourly. Students, faculty, other deans and department chairs, vice-presidents and the president hand challenges to them continuously. Be a bright light in their day. Share your accomplishments and successes.
4. Frame your ideas by doing much of the thinking ahead of time. There is seldom time to workshop your ideas with the dean or department chair unless they initiate it to get your feedback.
5. Respond in a timely manner. Follow the timelines and instructions. You appreciate it from your students, and they appreciate it from you.



6. Work on your professional and personal image. When they think about you, what do you think they think about you? Market yourself as being the collaborative, innovative and *go-to* type of professional. Doing so will provide you with more opportunities.
7. Make your dean or department chair look good. As in any positive relationship each partner needs to support the other. You have a better chance to succeed when your supervisor succeeds.

Many deans and department chairs were successful faculty and decided that they wanted to share what they learned in that work as leaders of faculty. However, keep in mind that some weren't successful faculty. We suggest that you talk with your supervisor about their own teaching to get a feel for what they enjoyed and what they didn't. Hopefully they have shared their vision with their employees. If not, ask them about their vision as you ask them why they chose to take the job. This information will help you decide how much help your dean or department chair can provide as you advance in your own teaching career.

### **Reflect on this Article**

Now that you have completed reading this article and thinking about the content as it applies to your work, please reflect on the following questions.

- What do you think about the relationship you have with your dean or department chair?
- Do you have an understanding of the roles your dean/chair fulfills? How can you be helpful in having a positive working relationship?
- How do you currently share your work are doing in the classroom and your professional growth? Does your institution have an avenue to share your work with your dean such as a professional development plan?

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## Action Checklist

Consider the following actions as you think about your working relationship with your supervisor.

<b>Working Effectively with Your Dean/Chair Action Checklist</b>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Analyze the current relationship with the dean/chair.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	I have figured out when I'd like to invite my dean/chair to one of my classes.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I know my dean's/chair's priorities for my department.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Identify strategies for working closely with the dean/chair.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	I will make an appointment to meet with my dean/chair.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I communicate clearly, completely, and in a timely manner when I need approval for my work, conference costs and other things.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am proactive about letting my dean/chair know if I am having a problem with a student.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I know how my dean/chair will assess my work performance.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am preparing a teaching portfolio to show my dean/chair my work in an organized way.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I communicate with my supervisor's administrative assistant.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Empathize with the work the dean/chair does.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	I know my dean/chair is busy, so I always am on time and keep meetings or conversations short and to the point.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am aware of my dean/chair's general responsibilities and my connection (if any) to them.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I make efforts to make my dean/chair's job easier by anticipating the needs for reporting, etc.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Develop strategies to best work with the program/department dean/chair.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	I understand my role in my department or division.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I know my reporting responsibilities and always submit materials on time.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I understand my department's goals as they relate to the institutional goals and make sure I align my courses accordingly.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I remain current in my discipline so that I can offer up-to-date practices and suggestions for improvement.