ADVICE

The Top 5 Faculty Morale Killers

A good midlevel manager can make all the difference in determining whether faculty life is satisfying or unbearable

By Rob Jenkins | APRIL 25, 2016

For nearly two-thirds of my 30-year career in higher education, I have served as a middle manager of one sort or another: department chair, dean, program director. For the other third, I have been middle-managed.

Of course, even as a low-level administrator, I had plenty of people above me telling me what to do. I also had people below me who, given the chance, gladly told me what to do.

The point is: I know what it's like to be on both sides of that transaction. Specifically, I know firsthand how department chairs can make faculty lives easier, and I also know what they do (all too often) that makes faculty lives more difficult (dare I say "miserable"?). Accordingly, I'd like to identify — for the benefit of new and future department chairs especially — what I consider the five biggest morale killers for college faculty.

But first, a brief disclaimer: For this column, when I say "faculty," I am referring either to: (a) full-time faculty on the tenure track; or (b) full-time faculty who are more or less permanently on the non-tenure-track (like lecturers). Adjuncts and other contingent faculty have their own set of morale killers — like low pay, lack of benefits, and poor-to-nonexistent job security. As full-timers, we should be grateful that we don't have to deal with those issues. But that doesn't mean we don't face problems of our own, many of which begin and end with department chairs and deans who are guilty of the following:

Micromanagement. People don't generally like to have someone looking over their shoulder and telling them what to do all the time, especially intelligent, highly trained professionals. But even among professionals, college professors are a special breed. We operate so autonomously, due to the nature of our work, that we can easily come to see ourselves as independent contractors rather than employees.

From an administrative point of view, that's not always a good thing. And yet faculty members do require a certain

amount of intellectual independence to do our best work. That notion is so widely understood that it is codified into policy and practice at most institutions; we call it "academic freedom."

If, as an academic middle manager, you wish to destroy morale in your department, you can start by dictating to your faculty members exactly what to teach, how to teach it, which materials to use, and how to evaluate students.

Trust issues. Faculty members interpret micromanagement as lack of trust. We assume that it means our leaders simply don't have enough faith in our ability or enough of a commitment to allow us to do our work as we see fit. Few things are more insulting than that to academics. Most of us are deeply committed to our professions and our students — we're sure as heck not in it for the money — and we likely know far more about our subject matter than the dean or chair.

Of course, trust is a two-way street. To be happy and productive, faculty need to feel trusted, but we also need to believe we can trust our leaders — to be open and honest, to follow through on promises, and to have the best interests of students and faculty at heart.

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In my experience, a department or campus suffering from low morale is almost always a place where faculty members do not have that kind of confidence in the administration. It's a place where trust has been broken.

Hogging the spotlight. The success of an organization is rarely attributable to any one person. And yet it's natural for leaders to want to take much of the credit, for several reasons: They're the ones in charge, after all, so the success must be due to their great leadership; they need such documented successes to solidify their positions, not to mention pave the way for future promotions; and they often take a disproportionate share of the blame when things go wrong, so why shouldn't they take most of the credit when things go right?

Such thinking may be natural, but it is anathema to a smooth-running organization. There are several behaviors leaders must learn that don't necessarily come naturally, and one of those is deflecting praise. Effective leaders know that when their organization succeeds, *they* have succeeded, and they are content to spread the credit around while taking little or none for themselves.

Ineffective leaders sabotage morale and create a toxic environment by taking most of the credit, whether they deserve any of it or not.

The blame game. Besides deflecting praise when things go right, leaders must also learn to accept the lion's share of the blame when things go wrong.

That can be very difficult, especially if the failure really wasn't their fault. Effective leaders understand, however, that just as they succeed when the organization succeeds, they also fail when the organization fails — whether or not the actual failure was their own. So they square their shoulders, accept the blame and accompanying criticism, and resolve to do better. (Note that "doing better" may well involve some very intense conversations with the people who were actually to blame. But those conversations should be kept, as much as possible, behind closed doors.)

Weak and ineffectual leaders, on the other hand, are always looking for someone else to blame. Nothing is ever their fault, even when it clearly is. I can't think of a better recipe for destroying morale in any organization, especially an academic department.

Blatant careerism. Finally, we come to one of my own personal pet peeves: Academic leaders whose sole ambition in life is to climb as high as possible on the administrative ladder and who are willing to do literally anything to achieve that ambition.

OK, maybe not "anything." I've never known an academic leader who committed murder in order to get a promotion, although I've known a few who probably thought about it. But "anything," in this case, can definitely include throwing people under the bus on their rise to power — i.e., pointing the finger at others when things go wrong in order to inoculate themselves against blame, and ratting people out for minor infractions in order to ingratiate themselves with the powers-that-be.

"Anything" can also include using the people under them as steppingstones — taking credit for other people's achievements and/or giving them make-work assignments that do little more than enhance the leader's own résumé. I once worked for a senior administrator, a real careerist, who was consistently guilty of this. I used to duck for cover anytime I heard that administrator coming because I knew any casual meeting would result in a new project for me, the only purpose of which was to make the boss look good.

That's no way to build morale. Academic leaders who behave that way, in my experience, might enjoy some short-term success but will rarely succeed over the long term, partly because, fortunately, they don't usually last that long.

Collectively, tenured professors are very powerful, as the former Mount Saint Mary's University president Simon Newman and others have learned to their regret. Professors rarely use that power, but they are more likely to do so when working conditions become unbearable.

Of course, that's not the only reason academic leaders should try to build morale rather than destroy it. Effective leaders try to create a workplace where people are comfortable and fulfilled, where they feel valued and believe what they're doing has meaning. People who feel that way are likely to be more productive, making the organization a success and creating plenty of credit to go around — even for a leader determined to deflect as much of it as possible.

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