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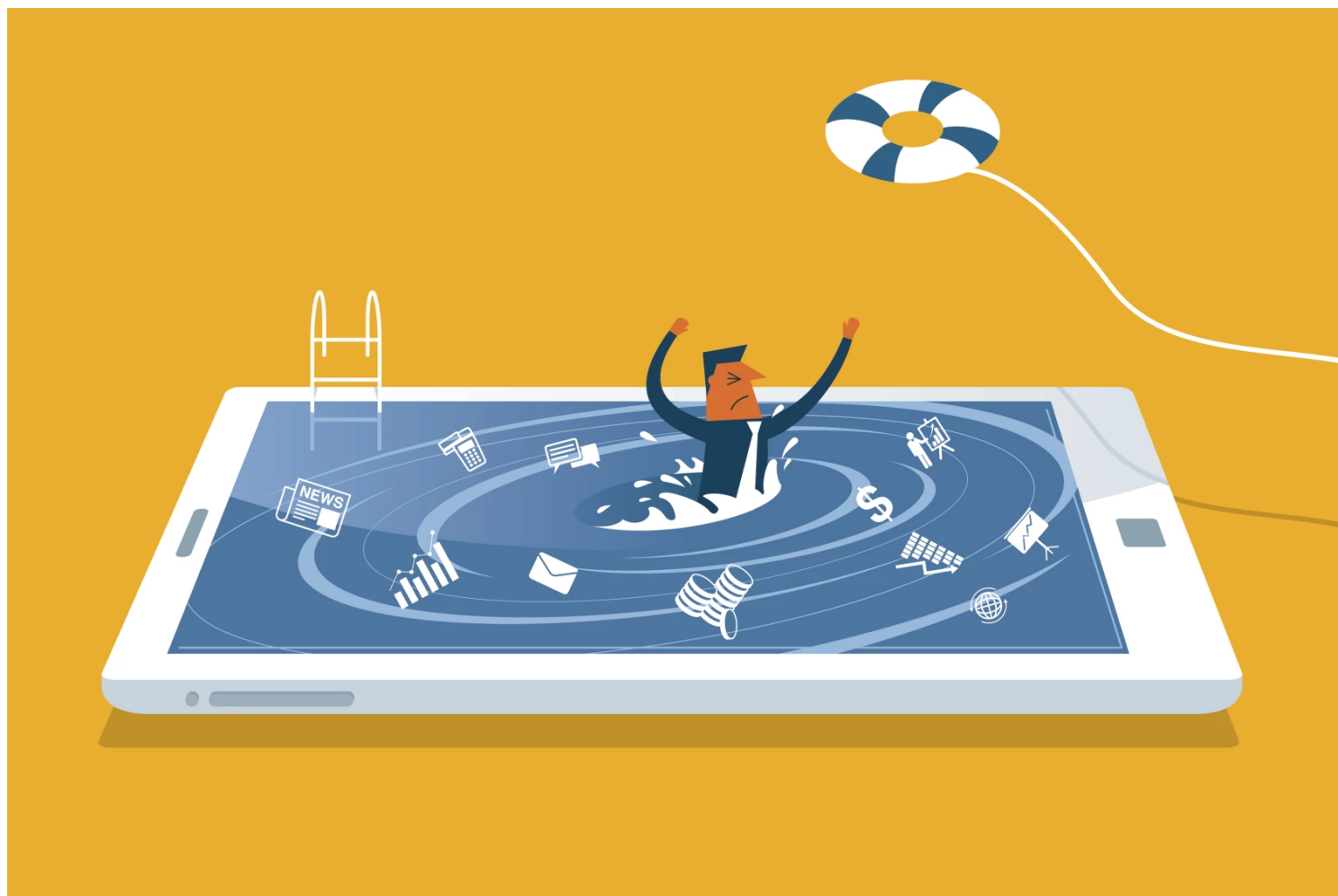
ADVICE

Too Much Information: Candor and the Department Chair

Five ways to be more open and efficient in managing the wave of campus data and policies flooding your department.

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The success of Netflix's *The Chair* has brought renewed attention to a lower middle-management position that has been the subject of much academic lore and mystification over time. We've all heard stories about long-suffering or underhanded chairs. But as a department head myself, I'd like to focus here on a question that is rarely discussed: Why is it so difficult to be a candid institutional gatekeeper?

Everyone can agree that a chair should be open and honest in principle. Academics refer to that trait as "transparency" — a term that, unfortunately, seems hackneyed now that it's a buzzword of managerial gurus. I would like to reinvigorate the concept and ask: Beyond ideals, beyond principles, what practical role can frank information management play in a contemporary chair's position?

Academics certainly perceive candor differently than we used to. At one time, becoming a department head signaled an initiation into an old boys' network with sudden access to salaries and secrets, such as files of your colleagues' malfeasance (what would now be Title IX reports). In that model, anything chairs learned about the department or the upper administration was mostly to be absorbed — not disclosed to faculty colleagues. Candor was a one-way street: Information flowed down to you as the new chair, and you were then burdened with keeping it secret for the rest of your career, and often pilloried by colleagues along the way for (allegedly) managing it poorly.

That wood-paneled and whisper-filled model of chairship has (one hopes) been superseded. However, candor is still not an easy ask for today's department heads.

Demands for openness and honesty are ubiquitous, yet the flood of information in higher education now is overwhelming. Institutions post reams of financial reports, enrollment figures, public statements, policies, and procedures that affect faculty careers. The many acronyms and budget models of upper administrators often are unfamiliar to the vast majority of faculty members. It's impossible to keep up with all the announcements, newsletters, and e-updates sent by offices and figures all over the campus.

A major role of today's chairs is to distill this sprawling mass of data into digestible units, and then translate them into clear, relevant, useful guidance to support and advance faculty careers. Your colleagues are looking to you, as chair, to convey the overload of information and procedures in a navigable way. With that in mind, I offer the following five sequential steps to help chairs devise, and put into practice as much as possible, a policy of openness and honesty.

Be clear about what you know — and what you don't and can't know. It is vital for your colleagues to understand that chairs are neither omniscient nor omnipotent. You have access to *some* information from the upper administration. But, for better or worse, most chairs do not have access to the subjective decision making of deans, provosts, or chancellors, nor is it worthwhile to speculate upon it. Delineate those boundaries clearly and stick to what you know.

I often think of my job, in part, as writing legal briefs for my colleagues about the processes around, and especially above, the work they do. I do the research by reading up and by speaking with deans, associate deans, and other administrators. Then I provide short, hopefully relevant reports. Anyone who wants the full dossier can ask for more information. But most everyone simply wants the plot summary as it relates to their career development, their research, their teaching, and/or their interests and initiatives.

Most important: Pass on what you know, when you know it, to everyone, as soon as it is safe to share the information publicly. No gossip, no insiders, no hints or intimations. Record official departmental meetings, and routinely post and share the minutes. This is also a time-saving mechanism to spare you many emails asking, "Do you know anything about X? Do you have any updates on Y?"

Your colleagues can then trust that, if you haven't shared information about some pending issue yet, you're not hiding anything. There's just no news to share.

Write it down. Write, write, and write some more. Guides, handbooks, departmental policy documents. And write them in collaboration with colleagues, through faculty-governance proceedings when appropriate. There is often little written down at the departmental level compared with the university and college levels, so as long as you can keep this pool of information within a consumable amount, your colleagues will appreciate written materials that explain internal policies in a way that is specific to your discipline.

It may sound like you're only adding to the information overload, but these are the documents that faculty members in your department will actually read closely. Post them online where they are easy for department members to access (on an internal server if they cannot be public).

At all costs, avoid sharing such information primarily by word of mouth. While personal mentoring is valuable, lore and institutional memory embodied only in certain individuals is a dangerous way to bring faculty members up through the ranks equitably. Historically, that bad habit has disadvantaged women and people of color. So write down paths to promotion, guidelines for tenure, expectations for annual performance, processes for review, voting procedures, definitions of departmental and institutional jargon — all of it.

This practice, too, has the added benefit of saving you more explaining. I was a slow learner in the profession, like many others who did not come from academic families. Written documents are easier to study privately and, for researchers, easier to master than having to sit down with someone who outranks you, ask questions, and take notes.

As chair, you can flatten the learning curve with transparent documentation. The corollary effect is to build mutual trust among you and your colleagues, who can see why they can rely on you and your stewardship of the procedures that govern their careers.

Show who makes decisions, when, and where. Everyone knows that sometimes there must be closed-door meetings and confidentiality. But that doesn't mean you can't be clear about the decision-making process and the policies that will guide those in the room. You can give faculty members a say in their teaching and service assignments, and explain how their preferences will be taken into account. You can discuss how service is assigned, and by what shared principles. If you believe in protecting women and people of color from the excessive burden of service that they are often pressured to shoulder, you can describe how you will prevent that. Again, write it all down. Be clear about the ideas at work and the processes at hand.

Similarly, spell out the limits of faculty input and preferences. You can't give everyone their top choices for teaching every term. You have to make difficult choices — like canceling low-enrolled courses — because of other decisions made far above your head. But some simple memos, written in collaboration with colleagues in order to express consensus values, can clarify the parameters.

Make annual reviews legible to faculty members and upper administrators alike. Professors deserve a full, written review of their annual dossier from their chair. Those review letters should go to both the faculty member and to the dean's office and should remain on file for both to access. This more specific suggestion may sound common enough, but review processes vary dramatically from campus to campus — just ask around.

Take the mystery out of evaluation. Clearly state what is being evaluated and by what principles, norms, and expectations. If there's a merit or advisory committee involved, incorporate and summarize its findings in the letters. Faculty members need feedback that reflects their work and that is shared as part of a dialogue about the shape of their career — in particular, their progress toward promotion, tenure, and/or contract renewal.

Be clear with members of your department on precisely what your role is so that you become neither hero nor villain. Help them see how critical it is that they take an active role in shaping the narrative of their own career, too. Few things could be more important.

Hold yourself accountable. Find ways of creating checks and balances to ensure that your work as chair — and that of whoever succeeds you — is not recondite. If you are revising procedures or bylaws, suggest mechanisms that allow faculty oversight of the chair when possible, and find ways to invite more colleagues to the table for decisions that, by habit or custom, had always fallen to the chair alone.

Make space, too, to say, "I simply don't know" rather than overpromising. Allow colleagues to ask at every juncture, "Do we want to do this differently?" Some will always disagree with their chair, and that's fine, but few will disagree with the goal of being as open and honest as possible in governance. And that will ensure that, since you will not be chair forever, the functional principles at work here will remain in place and alive once your term ends. Create written records of changes you've overseen, and their logic, so that the wheel doesn't have to be reinvented.

Complete candor is an illusory goal in every managerial position, and probably for good reason. Not everything can be known, or needs to be known, by everyone. Our office staff members, for example, work with professors who need medical accommodations, but those should never be public because they involve private conditions. It's also frustrating at times that retention packages create wide disparities that we can never explain because the terms are confidential.

Most of the time, however, it's possible to employ openness as a key quality of your leadership as chair, and it has helped me with my own continual learning curve in this role. Thinking seriously about what "transparency" can *do*, rather than just bandying it about as administrative jargon, can bring about serious change and build lasting trust in faculty-chair relationships.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

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