

## A Note on Three Roles of a Department Chair

A department chair plays three completely different roles simultaneously, which exert tremendous friction among themselves. The greatest challenge is to find the equilibrium that conserves the global energy without losing momentum when acting on three distinct planes.

This mini-essay will omit all the activity that a department chair does while running the logistics of the department. Although labor intense, it poses no major dilemma.

Most department chairs are scholars who are born and will die as true researchers. They act as scholars, want to appear as scholars, and be among scholars. Hence, they need to be faculty and do things that faculty do, from turning talented PhD students into potential stars to spreading interest in an audience and feeling the pleasure of finishing a beautiful paper. They are still a node in the lowest level of a tree, like any other faculty, and the energy that such a stability releases is precious.

However, department chairs are first-level managers of their faculty, and so they have to co-exist at one level above their peers. They care about the papers, the research grants, and the students of their faculty as grandparents do. They no longer blend. Rather, they superintend. The careers, conflicts, and anxieties of their faculty are like those of the chairs but have now to be managed, not lived. The challenge is that the lowest level of the tree has a wide range, and each node represents a very different faculty challenge. The position requires empathy and compassion when dealing with minds and egos of others at the same time that it requires firmness and clarity when promoting high standards and good practices. In this process, chairs need to be resilient so that they overcome this challenge and return to their own faculty node, on a regular basis.

The third frictional role of department chairs is to provide guidance in designing strategic and long-term goals and to lead the effort of the department in pursuing such goals. In no other organization is a first-line manager (in fact a busy one) asked to be such a bold leader. It reminds one to some extent of the early stages of companies, when entrepreneurs are still one step away from personnel. The hurdles are high. On the one hand, upper academic administration (here seen as nodes further up on the tree) does not have the sense of reality and the perspective of concreteness that a department chair has from dealing with faculty (and students) on a daily basis. Such a gap requires the chair to have the ability to advocate for the alignment of different visions so that success is still in sight for those below and above on the tree. On the other hand, each faculty acts like she or he owns a mini-company. They are to some extent *entrepreneurs*, managing their own research teams, setting goals, and planning long term -- which may allow us to see a department as a *holding company*. A great challenge arises when reconciling or embracing different strategies and bundling them up into a common one. Wrapping up, a department chair sets and implements a plan of action along different directions, demanding constant synthesis and coherence.

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