



- **The Eight Challenges**
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- **Summary**

When I lead workshops for college and university staff, I often start by asking participants whether they experience working with faculty as a challenging part of their jobs. When the chorus of “Sure do!” “Yes!” and “Need you ask?” dies down, I ask if they’d be willing to share some instances of interactions with faculty that didn’t go smoothly. And I ask them to let me and the rest of the group know how these interactions left them feeling. Sometimes it’s as though I’ve opened the valve on a fire hose of pent-up exasperation.

Let’s listen to some typical stories.

- “A faculty member wanted to hire someone she’d already picked out to be the new language lab manager. I had to try to convince her that, for legal reasons, fairness, and compliance with university rules, we had to go through a hiring process that included interviewing other people and hiring the best qualified. She actually said to me, ‘Do what you need to do, just get me the person

I want.' I felt so disrespected. And I felt caught between the rules I'm paid to follow and this professor who couldn't have cared less about the rules."

- "I work in the medical school, which can be very vibrant and exciting. But it wasn't so exciting when one faculty member invited a group of European professors to watch his new surgery techniques when they came to the U.S. The faculty member didn't work with me or anyone on staff to arrange the visit. When the professors arrived, they discovered that no permissions had been obtained from patients to allow observation of the surgery. This would take days to arrange, and the professors wouldn't be in town that long. I felt so frustrated because I knew I could have arranged it all if I'd been given the chance. And the snafu made our department look disorganized, which in turn made me and my colleagues look bad to our superiors. And, to tell the truth, I felt sad the visiting professors missed the opportunity to learn about the new surgery, which could have helped patients in their countries."
- "I work in the registrar's office, and while most of the faculty at this community college are great, a few never seem to get their grades in on time. Yesterday I ended up leaving work late because I had to go over to a professor's office and stand next to her while she emailed me the document that was due last week. It was the only way to get her to do it. I kid you not! And the whole time, she was complaining about how much bother I was causing her. It was all I could do to bite my tongue and get out of there as quick as possible. Really, I'm tired of chasing these laggards down. Someone should do something to make them appreciate how much extra work they're creating for staff."
- "I work as a program coordinator in the Philosophy Department. I support ten full-time faculty and thirteen adjuncts. It's a big job and I find it really stimulating. Recently, I was talking and laughing with three faculty members before a meeting, when two faculty from another department came up and joined in. We'd all been talking together for a while, when I realized they thought I was another faculty member. When they learned I was an assistant, they stopped making eye contact and talking directly to me. The next day, one of them passed me in the hallway and didn't

say hello. Obviously, I'm not part of the *in* crowd! I felt hurt and treated like a second-class citizen. Ouch."

- ♦ "I am a research assistant working full-time for a geology professor. Most of my job is administering his big grant. Just yesterday, an adjunct professor who was in the building to teach an afternoon class came up to my desk and asked me to duplicate handouts for his upcoming class. Even though this was totally outside my job description, and I had plenty to do otherwise, I did it. But later in the day I found myself fuming. Does this adjunct think that because I'm staff, I'm at her beck and call?"

And the stories keep coming.

So, can we conclude that these staff members hate their jobs? Are they poring over job listings looking for a way out? Hardly. Most of them tell me they love their jobs. They find working within academia fulfilling and meaningful, and they're quick to point out what they see as its many benefits. The environment feels alive with learning. It's stimulating to get to know some of the professors, and perhaps to get involved with a research project or take an interesting class. Staff enjoy a multitude of opportunities—both within academic departments and in such areas as human resources, accounting, business services, student services, research administration, facilities, and the police department, to name a few.

Yet, when I make it clear to staff that I want to hear the full story, when I invite them to open that fire hose valve, they often are more vocal about their challenges than they are about their opportunities. Even if they've had just a few painful experiences along the way, these can loom large. If only some faculty, they say, would make a greater effort to meet their deadlines, learn university procedures, respect the importance of staff contributions, understand what it takes to accomplish requests, and appreciate staff's hard work. Basically, they want to see faculty change. And they look to me to help them find a way to make this happen.

Of course, this desire to change the faculty is a valid perspective, at least in the sense that it is based on staff's legitimate experience. The desire to change how other people operate is a feeling that tends to arise when people feel frustrated. Perhaps you, as staff, can relate to this feeling. But there's an important catch. Quite simply, if you haven't noticed...over the long haul, it doesn't work!

We are going to examine closely in the chapters that follow why this is the case. But for now, let me say that this approach doesn't work for several important reasons. To begin with, trying to change others is a questionable strategy under any circumstances. Moreover, when staff pursue this strategy, it actually keeps them from getting their jobs done as well as they otherwise could. Then, too, staff morale is likely to suffer. Staff who try to change faculty's behavior or attitudes often find their relationships with those faculty members becoming increasingly uncomfortable.

The Eight Challenges

Before we try to change anything, it is usually a good idea to be clear about what we want to change and what we want to accomplish. Simply put, we need to define the problem.

Over the years of consulting and leading workshops for staff members, I've collected participants' descriptions of their challenges working with faculty. Of course, their experiences vary by institution, by department, by individual faculty member, by encounters on a daily or even moment-to-moment basis. The truth is, staff-faculty relationships are quite complex. However, by listening closely to the nuances staff members have expressed to me, I came up with eight challenges commonly faced by staff.

To be clear from the start, these are not categorical statements about faculty. I don't want you to take them as demands, or even requests, for faculty to change their habits. As I said, that strategy wouldn't be effective. Rather, these challenges represent the perspective of staff. I've really been listening to what staff have been telling me over the years.

1. Faculty often seem disorganized. Because they put their energy into other priorities, some faculty can seem preoccupied and unsystematic when it comes to responding to what staff need. As a result, they are dependent on help from staff members. This in and of itself is not a problem. After all, as staff, you are there to provide support. The challenge arises when staff feel that faculty fail to value the help on which they depend. For example, the checklist you created for getting their class materials produced on time may seem like a petty detail to them, and as a result they may not get the material to you on time. Some faculty may require hand holding beyond what staff job descriptions indicate. Other faculty may impose last-minute demands on staff

because of their own lack of organization.

What staff have said....

- “We are affected by their disorganization. I’m always waiting for them to find a paper that is lost in those piles on the desk, chairs, and floor.”
- “Faculty change their minds after production.”
- “I feel like the designated nanny. Getting the urology faculty off to a conference is like getting the boys off to camp.”
- “Faculty change their schedules at the last minute and don’t see the ripple effect. We’re the ones who face the wrath of students who get notified at the last minute.”
- “I try to help the professor use her time wisely. She’s so disorganized. I feel like I have to tidy up a scatterbrained Ph.D.”
- “I have to remind faculty to sign the academic forms, show up at meetings on time, follow the grant proposal time lines. Sometimes they get irked about it.”

2. Faculty often are unavailable. The term *academic freedom* refers to the freedom of intellectual pursuit, but faculty also enjoy considerable freedom and flexibility in their daily routine. One of the benefits of a faculty position is that it is not a nine-to-five job. Faculty can and often must work evenings and weekends, and can work out of a home office if they choose. So, even though faculty may be working a sixty-hour work week, staff may find them unavailable when needed for time-sensitive issues and decisions.

What staff have said....

- “Faculty often aren’t on campus. It’s hard to locate them.”
- “Sometimes I forge the mandatory faculty signatures so we can meet the deadlines.”
- “It’s nerve racking when I have to draft important letters without faculty input.”
- “We have to be prepared to make so-called executive decisions, and then to stand by them.”
- “It’s hard to keep in touch with eighteen adjunct professors. Some of them teach at satellite campuses, and I never see them.”

3. Faculty may not understand the volume and complexity of staff jobs. Staff often say they do not feel understood by faculty. Some faculty, staff say, are not well oriented to staff responsibilities and how things get done on campus. They may not realize what it takes for staff to deal with personnel issues, union contracts, patents, or complex procurement procedures. They may not know how long it takes to do the many routine things staff accomplish, such as getting signatures for promotion applications, hiring assistants, or getting them a visa to China.

What staff have said....

- ♦ “We doubled our enrollment, but the number of program assistants stayed the same.”
- ♦ “Faculty do not know what it takes to meet their requests. They don’t know how long it takes us to do some things. They think it’s a one-minute job.”
- ♦ “I’m overworked and overcommitted. All twelve faculty members in the English Department expect me to be their personal assistant.”
- ♦ “Faculty say, ‘I’ll sign off on it, but I won’t do the work.’ This increases my work load.”
- ♦ “Sometimes faculty are not responsive to our initiatives. I put in a proposal for a mentoring program for program assistants, and never heard back.”

4. Faculty members often do not follow procedures. University procedures and policies are often complex and not always widely known. Many faculty prefer to have someone else “just handle the logistics.” In this case, the department manager or program coordinator can search the university intranet for policies or consult with human resource specialists or research administrators to clarify what to do.

Faculty sometimes interpret academic freedom and tenure as license to do what they please. On occasion, universities actually reward faculty for not following procedures. This may make the faculty happy, but it can be challenging for staff. For example, staff in one Physics Department told me the chairperson and faculty got more than their share of university resources because they demanded loudly, manipulated the system skillfully, and had a dean who advocated for them. Staff in other departments had to get by with less.

What staff have said....

- “Faculty don’t bother to find out the policies and procedure, like they’re not allowed to do a human study without human-study protocols.”
- “Faculty asks us to set a new policy. We do, and then they don’t follow it. They even created a portfolio process themselves, and then did not follow it.”
- “Some faculty are like an old boys’ club. They do what they please, protect one another, and get away with murder.”
- “They won’t listen to you if you say, ‘It can’t be done.’ They just turn around and go over your head, directly to the registrar or dean, to get what they want.”

5. Faculty may have unrealistic expectations. Because of their lack of understanding about the scope of staff job responsibilities and their inattention to university procedures, faculty may have unrealistic or unclear expectations. According to staff, some faculty seem to think the best university staff members are invisible. Faculty may assume you can do something with a snap of your fingers, and fail to take into account the various and time-consuming steps you need to follow. Faculty may assume staff have the same privileges they have as faculty members. For example, when one faculty member sent a staff assistant to the library to make photocopies from a book, the assistant discovered that book was not part of the general collection and required faculty permission to access it. The faculty member was upset because he didn’t have the material when he needed it.

What staff have said....

- “I always hear, ‘The old program coordinators used to do XYZ. Why don’t you...?’ Hey, it’s not in my job description.”
- “It’s hard to draw the line when they ask you to do personal tasks.” (Specific examples staff have mentioned include going to Fed Ex on Saturday, and taking signed papers to a roofing contractor.)
- “I do it once and it becomes my job forever.”
- “We have to respond if they think it’s important, even if it’s not a priority for us. One faculty member asked, ‘Find out why they’re digging a hole outside my window.’”

- ♦ “They think we have a magic wand in our desks and can just make things magically happen.” (In one large university I visited, a staff member in the Mechanical Engineering Department has a toy magic wand in her drawer, which she occasionally uses to emphasize what she has to say to a faculty member or co-worker!)

6. Faculty may not communicate well. Staff report that communication skills do not feature prominently in the repertoire of some faculty. This may be especially true of faculty in the hard sciences or other technical, non-people-oriented fields. Faculty are not likely to be trained as communicators or managers. Even if you, as a staff member, have good interpersonal skills, it may be challenging to engage with faculty. In general, faculty do not look to organizational leaders or managers to define, direct, or evaluate their work. Yet there you are, in your staff job, doing things in ways that run counter to their preferences. As a result, what you communicate may be perceived by faculty as an interruption, pain-in-the-neck policies, or “administrivia.”

What staff have said....

- ♦ “Sometimes I can’t figure out what they are saying, what they really want. We’re expected to be mind readers.”
- ♦ “I’ve noticed the loudest and most manipulative or abusive faculty and departments are the most likely to get what they want.”
- ♦ “I struggle to find the best way to contact faculty. I mean, who likes email and who wants a phone call?”
- ♦ “It’s hard to say no or deliver bad news. The other day, I had to say, ‘Sorry, but you can’t write off a \$500 suitcase for your conference in Spain.’”

7. Faculty may come across as critical, disrespectful, or cynical. Faculty’s annoyance with administration may be expressed through a lack of civility toward administrators and staff members across campus. Twale and De Luca (2008) have written about what they call “faculty incivility” and the “bully culture” in academia, and provide a wealth of examples. Some faculty members can be critical, demanding, demeaning, or unresponsive. When this happens, there is little protection for staff members because the university needs these faculty as its academic stars.

A staff member told me the following anecdote. She said, “One

admin position is always being filled. We've had seven different administrative assistants in three years. This admin reports to an amazing scientist who does cutting-edge work, brings in a lot of money, works with the army and venture capitalists. All the brightest students want to work with him. But he can be a real jerk, very pushy. If he doesn't get what he wants, he goes to someone who will get it. He won't take no for an answer, even if it's against the law. He says things that belittle people, like asking how far they've gone in school.... When the admins can't stand it anymore, they quit. They usually find other jobs on campus. New admins will continue through the revolving door that leads to unrealistic demands, degrading criticism, and lack of appreciation. From one point of view, admins are expendable; this faculty member is not. You just have to understand, they [the university] want him here."

What staff have said....

- ♦ "Faculty tend to treat staff as impersonal parts of a machine, and not relate to us as whole people."
- ♦ "Faculty are cynical. They think the administration is out to get them."
- ♦ "When we have to shut down the facility or the network to do maintenance, the faculty have a fit."
- ♦ "They don't think much of us—they are surprised to learn I am on a board or am an elected official. If it doesn't pertain to them, they think it's competing with my fulfilling their demands."
- ♦ "Faculty can be aggressive, selfish, or micromanage at times when they need what they need. They seem disrespectful."

8. The institution may not provide sufficient staff orientation or training. Although this challenge is not about faculty per se, it contributes to the struggles staff experience in their work with faculty. While a few academic institutions provide excellent orientation for staff members, it is haphazard in most college and university settings. Staff may not understand the academic structure, culture, policies, or procedures, and faculty may be unaware of staff needs for training. Faculty may expect staff to do things they have not been oriented to do.

What staff have said....

- ♦ "It takes a long time to learn the job. We don't get an orientation when we first get hired."

- “There’s no organization chart, no structure, or only an amorphous structure. Reporting relationships are not clear.”
- “There are so many different policies to be aware of, such as copyright laws. How can I be expected to know all that stuff?”
- “We need more training on PowerPoint, BlackBoard, and other software, and how to post assignments online, to be able to help faculty.”
- “Faculty provide us with a very brief description of what they want. Then we must draw our own conclusions and get it right.”

Putting On Your Shoes

These are the challenges I have heard most commonly from staff. Participants in my workshops say these problems often feel overwhelming and quite mysterious. On their bad days, they come to some pretty dark conclusions about why working with faculty can be as hard as it sometimes is. Maybe the whole university environment is somehow “broken” or “screwed up.” Maybe faculty are (choose your pejorative): inconsiderate, clueless, arrogant, self-centered, unappreciative as people. Staff know this doesn’t define the complete picture, but they are just trying to make sense of the bad days.

So then, how to mitigate the pain?

What comes to mind is a Buddhist saying I like a lot: if you want your journey to be less painful, it’s easier to put on shoes than to cover the earth with leather. Isn’t that a great image? And so true. We don’t need to try to change everything and everyone in the world out there. We only need a deeper understanding of what is going on and what we can realistically influence.

You could think of this book as shoes for your journey toward a better working relationship with faculty. As I do with staff who attend my workshops, I am going to guide you to develop new ways of understanding and perceiving, communicating and partnering with, and appreciating faculty. What I offer will help you not only to survive, but also to thrive as you work with faculty.

We’re going to embark on this journey in the next chapter by looking first at the different characteristics and roles of staff and faculty that contribute to what we could consider the interpersonal culture of academia. This culture is the fertile ground in which many of the

challenges we have just discussed take root and grow. So, whether you've worked as staff for a week or your whole career, your ability to work well with faculty depends on understanding these important aspects of your workplace.

Where Do You Stand?

I've tried to represent the range of feelings and reactions expressed by staff who attend my workshops. Some challenges may have resonated more with you than did others. Ultimately, what matters is your ability to minimize challenges so you can take full advantage of the many opportunities that come with your job. So, before we continue, I suggest you take a quick inventory of what we have discussed so far.

- ◆ What do you see as the three most important opportunities for you in your work with faculty?
- ◆ What do you see as the three most important challenges for you in your work with faculty?
- ◆ Think of three strong emotions you feel or have felt in your working relationships with faculty. Are these feelings you wish to experience more often or less often?
- ◆ How do you deal with emotions and challenges that arise at work? Do you have a colleague or friend with whom can you speak openly and honestly about them?

[See Summary—I Hear You on the following page.]

FACULTY



Summary

I Hear You

- ◆ As staff, you may find your job fulfilling and meaningful. Nevertheless, at times you may find working with faculty can be confusing, frustrating, and challenging.
- ◆ I list eight challenges that staff often report, including faculty who seem disorganized, are unavailable, do not follow procedures, have unrealistic expectations, and are disrespectful to staff.
- ◆ Trying to change faculty members (or anyone else) can be frustrating and futile. In this book, I guide you to develop new ways of understanding and perceiving, as well as communicating and partnering with faculty.