

# **EMPIRICAL RESEARCH**

## **Meeting the Challenge of a Janus Job**

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### **Meeting the Challenge of a *Janus* Job**

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### **Introduction**

No one becomes an academic department chair in higher education without first having been a faculty member. After eighteen years as a faculty member at the same university, I was named interim department chair in 2005. With this administrative appointment came the assumption of what I perceived as a Janus job. In Roman mythology, Janus was the god associated with doorways and gates. He was frequently portrayed with two faces--one looking forward and one looking backward. Rather than being viewed as two-faced, Janus is more accurately described as vigilant. This image seems to fit aptly the role of academic department chair, which Rud (2004) has identified as an understudied administrative role. In this essay I describe this particular leadership role and present questions for self-assessment.

### **Why Janus?**

Just as Janus simultaneously looks forward and backward so does a department chair need to keep in mind the perspectives of both a faculty member and an administrator. Rather than feeling divided or split, a department chair should embrace the vantage points afforded by this unique Janus position. The role's dual perspective serves as a bonus not a burden. For example, a chair must respond to student complaints while knowing and remembering what it is like to be a faculty member. This orientation gives the chair a more balanced view of the situation and lessens the tendency to overact. Also, the department chair must move from "or" to "and" in several areas. For instance, the chair must be a planner *and* participant in professional development. As a faculty member I was not responsible for facilitating the development of others; I was primarily a participant. As chair I was responsible for planning opportunities to promote others' development, and I needed to be involved in these same activities. As a result of being both planner and participant, the quality of these experiences has the potential to increase. Additionally, while a faculty member is a part of the departmental group, an academic leader remains a part of the faculty *and* stands apart (or separate). Undoubtedly, the assumption of an administrative position changes one's relationships with others. In my case, more direct involvement with the dean (the administrative position above chair) and different interaction patterns with peers evolved. Nevertheless, having the dual perspective improved my understanding of both sides and made advocacy possible.

Roland Barth (2001, 85) defines leadership as "making happen what you believe in." This definition implies that you must first determine important beliefs before they can become reality. I knew we had a department mission/vision statement that faculty had developed in recent years. However, it was buried somewhere in a file folder. One of my first steps in this new leadership position was to make our vision more visible. I typed this vision statement in large, boldface print to use as coversheets on each faculty member's departmental notebook, and I stressed its importance in faculty meetings. Next, I tied faculty performance evaluation to this statement. Faculty had to submit evidence that they had endeavored to fulfill our vision through their

teaching. The purpose of this practice was to reinforce our collective vision and to give faculty more control over their evaluation.

From Janus we get our English word *janitor*. I learned that an academic department chair is like a janitor in several ways. The chair functions as the custodian of the department. Similar to an effective janitor in the traditional sense, a department chair is service-oriented and makes things better for others, takes initiative by seeing things that need attention and doing them, does needed tasks in an unobtrusive way (in fact, it is only noticeable when the task is left undone), and is meticulous in attending to details. As a janitor must often clean up other people's messes, so too must a chair when matters are handled inappropriately or not at all. Having the proper tools is vital not only to the job of a janitor but also a chair. Resources in terms of time, people, and budget are essential as is appropriate knowledge in using them. Just as a school janitor is often taken for granted, I had taken for granted my previous department chairs, not truly appreciating or even understanding what they did. Being in that same position taught me a greater appreciation for the somewhat invisible work of the chair.

Within an organization, the work of a janitor can have a significant impact on the climate of a place. So too can the work of a chair. In fact, when I was appointed to the position, I was told to improve the culture of the department. As Reeves (2006, 94) stated, "cultural change begins with the school leader." Yet first, I had to figure out what the existing climate was before I could focus my efforts on making it more positive. Capitalizing on the Janus perspective (i.e., being an administrator while also being a faculty member), I realized that I could teach other faculty what I had learned from my years of experience. In an effort to shape a more positive culture, I created a list of lessons to share (e.g., pettiness is unproductive, anyone can criticize, choose wisely the counsel of another, etc.). This list was distributed as a way to impact behaviors positively without preaching or pointing fingers. I worked to define my own values and to make them explicit. In an early faculty meeting, I shared my values of continuous improvement, teaching quality, and collaboration. Previously, the culture of the department did not include much talk about our basic mission, i.e., teaching. Therefore, I made available the opportunity to participate in a book discussion about teaching. This voluntary activity served to influence the departmental culture to focus more on what we all had in common rather than our differences. Overall, faculty responded positively to this opportunity.

One of the most helpful books that I read while serving as chair was *Monday Morning Leadership* by David Cottrell (2002). A key point of the author was that ignoring problems was ineffective leadership. Encouraged to address issues that had been allowed to slide, I was empowered by this advice. Furthermore, while it took me awhile to feel comfortable, I finally learned to lean on the expertise of another chair. She became an invaluable mentor and friend. Having this support is important in handling the challenge of any Janus job. I learned that leadership in the role of chair is not unlike other leadership roles. Success depends upon the ability to form relationships and to accomplish things through people. Moreover, respect and trust form the foundation of such productive relationships. Initially, I thought my job was to say "no" to numerous faculty requests. When I discovered that my job was actually finding ways to say "yes," my leadership capacity grew and positive change started to happen.

Time management is critical in the job as academic chair. Juggling the demands of upper administration with departmental issues takes patience and perspective. In addition, attention to personnel issues was most time-consuming. As a former faculty member who rarely caused distress to the chair (I think), I was unprepared for these demands. Learning to maintain a balanced perspective and to seek the larger view was challenging.

### **Self-Assessment**

Not seeking this leadership position, I was thrown into the role following the unexpected retirement of our chair. My interim status extended from an initial one year to two full years. Based upon what I know now and recognizing if I had had a choice in the matter, here are some important questions I would suggest aspiring academic leaders ask themselves:

- Do you want to be responsible for the welfare of others and for the direction of your academic unit? Why?
- Do you enjoy seeing, understanding, and impacting the big picture?
- Are you willing to give up some of your autonomy?

- Can you serve as an advocate for all program areas and students within the department?
- Do your personal values mesh well with those of upper administration?
- What do you most enjoy about being a faculty member? As chair, will the opportunity to do those things increase or decrease?
- Are you able to ask others for help?
- How much do you need appreciation or recognition from others?
- Can you separate important issues from minor ones?
- Do you know your own strengths and limitations?
- Are you able to maintain confidentiality and not engage in gossip?
- Do you enjoy making decisions?
- Are you able to reflect and respond in a timely manner?
- Can you handle frequent interruptions?
- How do you respond when others disappoint you?
- What motivates you to do your best?
- How do you handle power?
- What do you see as the major function of an academic leader?

Careful consideration of these questions can assist you in determining whether to pursue an academic leadership position. Teachers who are weighing whether to move into administration can use these same questions for reflection. As challenging as becoming department chair was, the Janus nature of the job offered a new outlook and appreciation for what others do. I know that I am a better follower/faculty member and leader still even though I chose not to continue in the position. Recalling that the month of January was named for Janus, this leadership job can also be seen as a new beginning for one's career. Such an optimistic outlook can only serve you well as a leader.

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