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### Lean on Your Staff

By Michael C. Munger

Last spring I wrote [a column](#) about some useful things that every new department chair should know (*The Chronicle*, April 9). I was looking back on 10 years of leading the political-science department at Duke University and thought I could save future generations from making all the same mistakes I did.

But I made another mistake in writing it, by leaving out the role of administrative staff members. Sure, I wrote that working with them had been my second-most-important job as chair—after hiring faculty members. Unfortunately, the only "work" I mentioned was firing corrosive staff people. And commenters wondered about that, quite rightly.

So let's give the staff members their due. We all rely on them, even if we don't admit it, either to them or to ourselves. Here are five suggestions for academic administrators trying to manage staff members for the first time.

**Show some respect.** I saw a cartoon in *The New Yorker* years ago. An older man, clearly a CEO, was making a toast at an office holiday party. Raising his glass, he said, "I could not run the Wacko Widgets Company without the help of each and every one of you ... or someone very much like you."

Is that how you think of staff members? As interchangeable, expendable hired help? That's just not accurate. It is more often the faculty members who come and go, chairs and administrators who fret and strut their hour upon the stage and then are heard no more. But the heart, the soul, and the institutional memory of the department is the staff member, usually a woman, who holds things together. Lots of faculty members are big on "the people," but don't give individuals the respect they deserve. So show some respect if you expect to be respected.

**Stand up for them.** At one of my first budget meetings, a staff member wished me luck: "Get us lots of money!" She was kidding, but, in fact, the chair can make a huge difference financially for faculty and staff members by pressing at every margin. Many

institutions in these hard budget times are holding the line on salaries. But staff salaries are tiny by comparison with faculty paychecks, and it may be possible to obtain a little more flexibility in budgets in places where a couple of thousand dollars make all the difference.

You can do at least four things for staff members, just by standing up for them. First, make sure their computers and equipment are replaced on a cycle that is no longer than that of faculty members, and maybe shorter. Many staff members spend eight hours a day on their computers. Having one that is slow or that crashes regularly not only hurts their productivity but slows down the work they are doing for professors. Make sure printers, scanners, and other peripherals work well. And if you need new equipment for the staff, go after it. It's your job.

Second, borrow or transfer money from other accounts to make sure staff members get raises. You may be able to take \$1,500 out of the faculty raise pool, and give two high-performing staff workers \$750 each. That's an extra 1.5-percent raise for those two staffers making \$30,000 a year, a raise they will be grateful for. And if you are doing that by reducing the raises you give to 10 faculty members by \$150 each, they won't miss the money.

Third, staff employees have to arrive at work earlier, and stay later, than the average faculty member. Yet they have to walk or ride buses from distant parking lots, and their offices are smaller and with fewer windows than faculty offices that may sit empty for months. Those differences will never be closed, and I am not claiming they should be. But you can be ready to lobby the administration if better parking opens up. And if your department is moving or if new offices become available, make sure the interests of staff members are protected.

Finally, ask your staff what they want you to stand up for. Once a year, or more, try to have a coffee or some private talk with each staff member, outside of the tense circumstances of evaluation. In those casual chats, ask, "How can I help? What one thing, or two things, could I do to make your life easier, or your work more effective?" You may be surprised by how often you can do something. In any case, we all like to be asked. Try it.

**Develop career goals.** As professors, we tend to be very concerned about our careers. From the time we are junior scholars, worried about tenure, through our most senior years, we are thinking of ways to learn, grow, and accomplish new things. But too many

faculty members tend to see a staff job as a kind of endpoint, as if only professors have careers or are capable of intellectual growth.

Work with your staff members to help them plan out short-, medium-, and long-term career goals. In the short run, they can build new skills, such as learning how to use various software programs. In the medium term, all staff members should have a plan for how they can learn new systems at the university, such as cross-training in budgeting and class scheduling. That way, if someone is out sick or needs to go on maternity leave, the whole office won't shut down and you won't need to hire a temp.

In the long run, see if you can help your staff do the unthinkable: leave! You don't need tenured staff members. You need people who are constantly learning and improving, people with their own career goals. You want to become such an interesting unit, so focused on training, that ambitious staff members from other units will try to work for you. Sure, you may have them for only 10 years or so. But in the meantime, the people on your staff will get more work done, and have more fun, because they know they are getting better.

One caveat: Avoid favoritism, or even the appearance of it. An ambitious staff member may seem like a threat to others who are less driven. There will often be generational resentments within the staff, in which factions form around doing things "the old way" versus the way newcomers propose. As a manager, you can't let such resentments fester and build. Be careful to bestow praise, and rewards, widely rather than focusing only on those who may be the most technically skilled or recently trained.

**Find balance.** Many workplaces talk about helping employees balance family and work. But policies are of little value unless the manager and senior staff members are able to give concrete expression to that balance. Some of your staff members may be single mothers, and it is likely that some will have more children during your term as chair. It is important to accommodate their needs, but it is also important to consider the needs of other staff members, men or women who have finished raising children, have not yet begun, or have no interest in starting a family.

Talk to your human-resources office about how to be sensitive to the need to balance work and family, yet resolve the internal tensions over such problems fairly. For example, suppose that one woman on your staff has terrible morning sickness and then is prescribed bed rest for the last trimester of her pregnancy. Other employees are going to have to cover for the absent employee, and that will probably mean they have to do their own jobs and part of hers, too. It is your job as a manager to maintain not only the absent worker's

position but also a supportive atmosphere, so that when she returns to the office in a few months there is not too much resentment and hurt feelings.

**Know when to hold 'em, and when to fire 'em.** Strangely, my most important preparation for serving as chair was when I was working my way through college as a manager at a fast-food joint, from 1977-80. I saw people there who needed to be fired, and I saw them get fired. And I saw that it was good, very good, for the morale of the store. Often, more surprisingly, it was even good for the employee.

Many academic administrators can't imagine being fired, and so they can't bring themselves to fire anyone. But not every job is the right one, and it may well be that by firing a corrosive or unhappy employee you are doing everyone a favor, including the employee.

In my 10 years as department chair, I personally fired six staff members and participated in the firing of two others. Admittedly, one of those threatened to kill me after being let go, but two others later thanked me, and in both cases, we have restored friendly relationships. Those two employees are much happier, and make far more money, now than in the jobs they were doing so badly in my department.

Failing to fire someone who needs to be fired is simple shirking your duty as a manager.

Let me close by noting that with some effort and attention you can get better at managing staff members. I certainly did. To be a successful chair or dean, you will have to do many things well. But if you ignore the centrality of working with staff employees you will probably fail as an academic administrator. Give the suggestions I have listed above some thought, and then do your best.

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