Academic Leadership References

A review of key works on academic leadership by Deborah Herman

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Note: Here are the University of Cincinnati, different colleges use different terms to refer to the academic unit head: department chair, division head, and school director are the most common. For simplicity’s sake, I have not changed the terminology used by the authors in their respective works.

The Department Chair Primer: What Chairs Need to Know and Do to Make a Difference. Don Chu. Wiley & Sons, 2012 (2e).

This book is attractive for several reasons, including its length (about 100 pages) and its high marks on the “easy to read” scale. It’s mostly a descriptive overview of the various roles a department chairs play, however, and doesn’t give much in-depth analysis or advice on how to handle the problems that inevitably arise when things don’t go as planned. You’d be better off spending that 100-pages of reading time on something with more meat on the bone.

Academic Leadership: A Practical Guide to Chairing the Department.

This is the graduate school version of the previous book. At 381 pages in hard cover, it’s not a book you want to drop on your toe. The first section (“Leadership”) alone makes this book worth the price. In chapters such as “Advice for New Chairpersons,” “Seven Habits of Successful Chairpersons” and “Timesaving Tips for Effective Chairpersons,” the author provides the kind of practical “Been there done that!” advice that every new chair needs.

Leaming is a former professor of Journalism and currently serves as dean of the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. He has
served as department chair and dean at several institutions over the course of 20 years—so he has been there and done that. He is also the founding editor of the online journal *Academic Leadership*.

Experienced and new chairs alike will benefit from the insights provided in the section entitled “Department,” which is a valuable collection of chapters about issues that academic department chairs far too rarely receive any advice on (let alone training). The topics include developing a departmental vision, managing change, managing conflict, building and maintaining morale, and conducting effective meetings.

This last topic—conducting effective meetings—is worthy of an entire day of leadership training, ideally based on the *Interaction Institute model*. But absent such an opportunity, this chapter gives a good overview of many of the good practices that lead to productive, healthy meetings that move a department forward, while stating explicitly the kind of behaviors and practices that lead to “bad” meetings that contribute to departmental dysfunction.

In an otherwise excellent book, the sections on “Legal Issues” and “Faculty” are problematic. In particular, the advice given in “Legal Issues” places far too much burden and responsibility—and authority—in the hands of the department chair. The advice on p. 208 about how and what to document in a meeting with a faculty member is sound, but advising a department chair to unilaterally conduct an investigation into an allegation of sexual harassment is unwise (and contrary to University policy and practice); advising any chair to tell a student who’s complained about sexual harassment to “tell the harasser to stop, making clear that the behavior is unacceptable” is downright alarming. This book was published in 2007; in the 9 years since its writing, much has changed. I would read the chapters in the “Legal Issues” section as a means of discovering the kinds of incidents and questions that you might run into as chair, but I do not recommend it as a guide for action. Actions in this area should be guided by University policy, consultation with your Dean and the Vice Provost for Academic Personnel, and the AAUP-UC collective bargaining agreement.
The fourth section, “Faculty,” contains some excellent advice, although once again, a department chair at the University of Cincinnati should read it in the context of existing University policies. The advice on “chronic poor performers” is solid, but should be read in conjunction with the *Elephant* book (see below), and the chapter on “Dealing with Difficult Faculty” should be read as a preview to the much more careful and in-depth review provided by *Working with Problem Faculty* (see next summary).

All in all, though, this is an excellent resource which I highly recommend, with the above caveats in mind.

*Working with Problem Faculty: A 6-Step Guide for Department Chairs.*

A [2009 survey](#) of some 3,000 academic department chair in the United States by this author showed that “dealing with problem faculty” was seen as the most urgent issue by a wide margin. This book is a response to that call for help.

Professor Crookston’s interest in this topic is based on his career as both an academic and administrator. He was dean of the College of Biology & Agriculture at Brigham Young University from 1998 to 2005, and currently serves as Associate Director of the Brigham Young University Faculty Center where he directs the academic administrative support program. He researches academic administration and decision-making, and teaches effective decision-making to undergraduates.

When Professor Crookston uses the term “problem faculty” in this context, he is not talking about a faculty member whose personality is on the prickly side, or who tends to play the devil’s advocate role in a faculty discussions (behaviors that many would expect or even find desirable in a faculty body). He’s talking about dealing with the kind of difficult Human Resources problems that one find in *any* employee group—private, public, for-profit, not-for-profit, education, religious, it
doesn’t matter the sector—but for which academic department chairs in the United States are given woefully little if any training. These issues include:

- Workplace bullies—this means significant verbal abuse and/or email harassment (not just “argumentative” or “sarcastic” types)
- Actual or threatened physical aggression
- Severe lack of collegiality (rising to the level of antisocial behavior that interferes with department function)
- Chronic poor performance or refusal to perform expected duties (e.g., committee participation or leadership)
- Significant physical or mental health problems that interfere with the faculty member’s work performance (or interferes with others’ work performance)

A tiny percentage of faculty with these kinds of serious issues can impede the ability of an entire department to function in a healthy and productive way. In a worst case scenario, such a faculty member can cost a University huge sums of money should lawsuits and/or widespread negative publicity result from that person’s behavior. A more common but equally devastating result can be a department mired in dysfunction, including the loss of new and highly productive faculty who don’t want to tolerate abusive behavior or the failure of even a small number of senior faculty who can’t or won’t “pull their weight.”

While the chair can rarely resolve such difficult H.R. problems alone, having the kind of knowledge that is presented in this book is a necessary first step.

Professor Crookston outlines 6 basic steps for dealing with these employee situations:

1. Clarify values and expectations
2. Follow policy
3. Build trust with colleagues
4. Evaluate yourself and your perceptions
5. Listen
6. Take effective action
In reading the details of the solid advice that Crookston provides, it will quickly become clear that while the department chair is on the front line, s/he will need assistance from key administrative personnel (the Dean, Vice Provost for Academic Personnel, certain staff experts such as those in the Office of Equal Opportunity). Effectively dealing with “problem faculty” almost always requires a team effort.

Crookston also makes clear in the introduction that most often the mere existence of a problem faculty member in a department indicates that an entire system of decision-making needs to be examined.

We considered an incident that led to the firing of a staff member in the office of a large college. The dean had gathered the staff and asked them to consider where they had messed up. He didn’t spend any time discussing how the person just fired had messed up, but rather began asking such questions as “Who hired her?” “Who trained her?” “To whom did she report?” and “With whom did she interact?” He then said, “All of us have failed,” and pointed out that it would be a mistake to hire a replacement until they discovered how they could get things right. ... “If we rehired without changing the way we do things, we may just end up firing the next one.” (p. 5)

While department chairs cannot alone effect systemic change, they can play a key role—perhaps the key role—in handling these issues when they occur. They can also point out where the system is failing and, thus, help improve the system in order to prevent such problems from occurring in the first place in the future.

If 10% of the people take up 90% of your time, it’s well worth the investment of time to learn how to resolve that troubling 10%—and analyze the system in order to try to reduce that original 10% on the front end down to 5% or even 1%.
Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most.

High level communication skills are demanded of anyone in a leadership position, in routine meetings, one-to-one conversations, and large group presentations. Yet people who are given leadership positions are rarely provided with any specific training on this special skill. Many such leaders are considered excellent communicators in their “regular” work before ascending to a position of leadership, only to find that those communications skills that served them well in the past don’t quite seem to be enough in the new role.

Communication as a leader requires a different kind of skill than the average person is used to employing: the structured conversation and the structured meeting. Structured does not mean constrained; it does not mean that the person in leadership is preventing people from speaking or quashing ideas that s/he believes are unproductive (contrary to some unfortunate notions of leadership). Rather, it means the one-to-one conversation or meeting agenda and conversation or speech has a planned purpose and a goal. The structure provides the bones of the conversation, but it doesn’t define the content.

This kind of structured communication is familiar to those who routinely or professionally engage in negotiations of one kind or another (e.g., some businesspersons, professional mediators, counselors, or contract negotiators), but doesn’t come naturally to those who don’t have specific training or who don’t professionally engage in this work.

While the topic is deep, much can be learned with some reading and some pretty basic training. This book and the next are key resources.

Difficult Conversations is a product of the Harvard Negotiation Project, the organization that also put out the famous Getting to Yes!, considered a classic on the art of mediation and negotiations. In this book the authors discuss the nuances and structures of purposeful or structured conversation where the goal is “negotiating” difficult topics in the most productive manner possible.

The authors propose there are three levels to any conversation:
1. The "What happened" conversation (complexity/ right-wrong)
2. The Feelings conversation (emotional charge/whose really count?)
3. The Identity conversation (threat to our identity/ competent vs. incompetent, lovable vs. not lovable, good vs. bad/ no in-between)

In a conversational style that might seem a bit rambling to those accustomed to academic reading, the authors discuss how to:

- prepare yourself for a difficult conversation
- open up the conversation without being defensive
- keep the conversation constructive and focused, regardless of how the other person responds
- analyze the underlying structure (see above) of a conversation
- interpret the significant of what is said, and what is not said
- identify erroneous but deeply ingrained assumptions (the other person’s and yours)
- manage strong emotions (the other persons – and yours)
- identify the ways your self-image affects the conversation

Some people will like the conversational style and the many anecdotes and examples; others may find them repetitive and tedious. Everyone who reads this book will almost certainly walk away thinking, “Wow, this is complicated!” And they should, because structured communication is complicated, and even more so when the topic is difficult. That being said, it doesn’t require a PhD to learn it.

This book is best read one chapter at a time, with a break in time between the chapters to allow the left brain internalize the material.

While I prefer the Elephant book (below), this work is a classic and is, in many ways, the basis for later publications.

Related books:

Like Difficult Conversations, this book is about how to plan, execute, and follow up on difficult conversations in the workplace. Academics should not be put off by the humor or breezy writing style (i.e., presume it’s not well grounded in research); rather, let’s happily take advantage of the fact that someone “translated” a lot of these complex ideas into bite-sized chunks!

Ross takes the reader, step by step, through a process that provides you—the academic unit head—with the very best chance for success in dealing with difficult conversations such as:

- Delivering bad news
- Delivering sad news
- Addressing rude or disrespectful behavior
- Addressing poor work performance
- Pointing out poor personal hygiene
- Saying no/turning down a request

The four steps she outlines seem simple enough at first glance:

1. **Prepare** the conversation
2. **Design and Deliver** the ABC message (accurate, brief, clear)
3. **Stop Talking** and Start Listening (this is harder than you think)
4. **Respond** Powerfully (responding is not the same as reacting)

Going through these steps takes up about 75% of this book—so that tells you that it’s not (unfortunately) as simple as it seems at first glance. But Ross breaks it down better than any other book I’ve seen so far (including its parent material in Difficult Conversations).

In the last section, Ross wisely closes with advice on how to lead in such a way that you prevent, as much as possible, the need for difficult conversations (an ounce of prevention...). She recommends:
- **Adopt the 5:1 rule** (have 5 positive interactions for every 1 stressful or negative interaction)
- **Practice** routinely providing sincere appreciation of good work
- **Master** the art of the sincere (but guilt-free) apology

It’s an excellent closing chapter for an extremely helpful book.