

Tomorrow's Academia

Chu, D. (2006). Department Meetings in *The Department Chair Primer: Leading and Managing Academic Departments*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Co. Dr. Don Chu is from the University of Southern Florida

DEPARTMENT MEETINGS

Professor Jake Speare has been recently elected chair of the Department of Theatre with lukewarm faculty support. He is about to face his first department meeting of the year. It is also that first formal faculty gathering since the last department meeting one year ago. Frankly, meetings were avoided because they seemed to stir up too many problems, and emotional outbursts derailed discussions. When issues came to a vote, the lack of consensus made action difficult. One problem was that the faculty didn't feel they understood issues well enough to make informed choices. Too much time was spent on administrivia, and faculty complained that they couldn't attend because of classes and other professional commitments. Then there is Professor Wrench, who makes it a point to comment on every subject and who is very fond of making motions. Every one of his positions is opposed by a group of faculty led by Professor Stuch. Their tangling consumes so much time that little is accomplished.

How should a new chair deal with department meetings? In this age of electronic communications, are they even necessary? If they are important, what is the best way for chairs to approach these gathers of the faculty? For most academic units, the department meeting is the only regularly scheduled opportunity for the faculty (and in some cases, for the staff) to personally interact as a body. Meeting times and dates are preestablished at the beginning of each academic term or held on rotating days to include as many faculty as possible by accommodating as many schedules as possible. Faculty may view meetings as critical pieces of a schedule for action, or they may avoid them because of the conflicts that can engulf fractious parties cloistered together in the same room.

In most departments, it is the chair who calls for a meeting of the department and who sets the agenda. This is considerable source of influence that should not be underestimated. It is typically the chair who introduces and moderates discussion and who commands the floor, recognizes speakers, and enables actions to be taken as a result of department deliberations. While email has added to department communications, electronic means cannot completely replace personal interaction. Face-to-face meetings remain necessary for emotional support and a sense of group support. Chairs must understand, however, that before the department meeting is held, it is important to consider the setting, the agenda, the nature of the business to be conducted, and the probable reactions of those in the meeting. Given a moderate-size faculty, an hour department meeting costs thousands of dollars of professional time. The chair must recognize just how important this time is to the faculty in the room, and to the institution, and to make the best use of the department meeting.

1) The chair's performance in department meetings provides an opportunity to convey a public face that reflects the values and abilities of the chair. Is the chair fair, respectful, knowledgeable, reasonable, capable, and a good representative of the department? Given the small number of times that professionals typically spend with all of their colleagues, the department meeting is the most crucial social engagement for the department chair. How he or she frames questions objectively and insightfully, recognizes speakers without political or personal bias, and summarizes discussion so as to engender the next best step for the department speaks volumes for the chair's character and competency. Department chairs who allow themselves to be dragged into the mud of personal recriminations are less effective leaders than chairs who empathize with those making a comment but who are able to stay above the fray.

2) The chair establishes the agenda for department meetings. Most department policy manuals specify that it is the chair who leads meetings. The usefulness or uselessness of a meeting is largely dependent upon the efficiency with which the chair plans and runs the meeting. Are only issues important to most of the faculty on the agenda, or should items of less significance be handled in committees and reported as information items? Does the chair recognize what is of interest to most faculty and what requires full discussion before the legitimacy of some action on behalf of the department is accepted?

3) The chair's position as moderator of discussion is critical to department relations and to forward a department agenda. Chairs must be knowledgeable on the issues, unbiased, good listeners, capable summarizers of discussion, and turn department approval into action. Good moderators know when discussion is necessary and also when it is just continuing to beat a dead horse.

4) Chairs are responsible for providing the background information and laying out viable options for the faculty to consider before deciding upon a course of action. Because the department chair has access to personnel files, privileged data sources, and the offices of the dean and other central administrators and their staff, chairs are best equipped to research some issue of importance to the department. It is essential that the faculty be given the information they need to consider before engaging in data-driven discussion. For example, prior to consideration of how to absorb a budget reduction, faculty need a clear presentation on the department's fiscal condition, models for budget reduction, and ramifications of each model if adopted. Does the chair present background information and options for department actions in an unbiased fashion? Is the chair knowledgeable on the issue? Does the chair have the confidence of those with information important to the department, so he or she can gather the information most necessary for the department to know?

5) In a 10-FTEF department, a one-hour meeting costs roughly \$1,000-\$2,000 in personnel costs. What does this mean in concrete terms?

- * Use every precious minute as efficiently as possible.
- * Overhead and PowerPoint presentations need to be clear and work the first time.
- * All faculty should receive an electronic agenda before the meeting and a hardcopy at the meeting.
- * As much as possible, housekeeping and administrivia need to be taken care of at some time other than the department meeting.

6) Regularity of meetings varies by department. Some departments meet only when there is business to conduct. Others meet every other week. Still others meet once a month. It is critical that all relevant constituencies be able to attend department meetings. If meetings to talk about tenure and promotion criteria are only held early in the morning when senior faculty are available, this scheduling may exclude the junior faculty who teach during the earlier hours of the day and who have significant interests in this topic.

7) Pay attention to meeting ambience. Human communication is primarily nonverbal. The type of language employed, even seating arrangements, can speak volumes. Is the department meeting to be formal or informal? Business efficient or warm and friendly? Will refreshments be provided or maybe faculty will take turns bringing goodies? On some occasions maybe a meeting will even be catered! Coffee, juice, and muffins are very much appreciated during early morning meetings. This tells the faculty that they are valued.

8) Meeting minutes are the official record of department actions and agreements. Minutes need to be taken by an unbiased party, sent to the department for review, approved as officially accepted at the following meeting, and then recorded as a department archive. While some minutes may look like narratives of who said what, at a minimum, minutes are a history of department actions. In future years when disagreements may call for research into the intent of a department vote, the minutes will be consulted.

9) Do department committees regularly report their action and discussion items, or are paper or electronic minutes distributed to the faculty? Faculty committees work on behalf of the faculty. Except in the case of confidential personnel committee work, all faculty have a right to know what their committees are doing. In the name of transparency of operations, it is typically the best policy to routinely send out meeting agendas and minutes. Another reason to send out email accounts of committee actions is because faculty time is so expensive. It is always best to reduce the amount of time spent reporting during department meetings by sending out information via email. Discussion of significant committee actions may also be in the best interest of the department. If the chair feels that discussion and consideration of committee actions is important, then it is appropriate to invest department meeting time to do so.

10) Reserve some time for public kudos and recognition of faculty and staff achievements. All departments are human organizations. Recognition of significant publications, grants, teaching awards, and the like presents models for emulation by all members of the department. We all need a pat on the back now and then.

11) Become familiar with Robert's Rules of Order. Academic departments are always changing, and while change is welcomed by some, it will inevitably be resisted by others. Discourse requires rules for engagement; therefore, it is imperative that the chair be familiar with Robert's Rules of Order (Robert, Evans, Honermann, & Balch, 2000) due to the widespread legitimacy of its application in academic organizations. Some departments elect a parliamentarian and some do not. It is important for the chair who moderates discussion to know the rules of order—who speaks when and on which subjects? What is a point of clarification? What is a point of order? How does a motion come to a vote? When is it proper to begin a speakers list? When should the chair excuse himself or herself from the role of moderator and appoint a temporary moderator?

12) Be willing to employ a speakers list, especially while discussing contentious issues. A list of who had raised their hands to speak ensures civil engagement, maintains order, and permits all of those with something to say an opportunity to take the floor from those who are perhaps louder, more vocal, and insistent. Use of a speakers list helps keep discussions on track and minimize emotional outbursts that can derail a meeting.

13) For issues that can benefit from further study and deliberation, consider employing study groups or assign research to standing or ad hoc committees to pick up where discussions end. It is important that chairs recognize when discussion is becoming circular and unproductive or when discussion of one topic threatens to monopolize the time allocated for other department meeting items. At such a time it may be useful to table discussion, elect, appoint, or call for volunteers to serve on a group to research and discuss the contentious issue, and then report back to the chair and faculty. The charge and the schedule can be provided to the newly formed committee during the department meeting or in later discussion with the chair. Also be sure to appoint someone to convene the first meeting of the group.

14) It is critical that committees represent department constituencies well enough that the committee has credibility. All department meeting activities need to take place in a transparent fashion so as to minimize perceptions of unfair process. The process through which department committees are nominated and elected is critical to department health. If elections take place during department meetings, all constituents need to know when the election will take place and the means used to nominate and elect committee members. Discontent is guaranteed by committees that are loaded with too many advocates of one position.

15) Employ techniques to further progress on contentious issues. Invite faculty input via department listserv, or invite written comments that will be used to revise documents for further department consideration.

16) Employ action plans to move along important department decisions. The department meeting that leads to a motion carried but does not lead to action is like a promise broken. It is up to the chair to enable action on the will of the department by helping the department develop a concrete plan of action, with measurable indicators of progress to be achieved within a specified timeframe by specified representatives of the department. Talk needs to be translated into action.

17) When the chair clearly has a position on some issue, it is appropriate to temporarily appoint someone else to lead discussion. The perception of the chair as objective is perhaps the most critical requirement for the job. The chair who can see both sides of an issue, who can summarize opposing points of view, and who does not take sides can be an effective broker in the department. If the chair has a point of view on some issue in the department, it may be best for the chair to temporarily hand over the responsibility of running the meeting to the associate chair or some other senior member of the department. Doing so allows the chair to express his or her point of view while remaining objective and evenhanded on all other issues.

18) Faculty expected to contribute a briefing or report at department meetings need to be advised beforehand so that they will be prepared in advance. It is important that a culture of excellence be created in the department. This is especially true during public displays and presentation of faculty work. Chairs will often want heads of committees to report. They may want faculty members to highlight their work or for a staff member to present findings from institutional research conducted on behalf of the department. In every case involving public presentations, it is wise to make sure that the speaker clearly knows what the chair wants presented and how long the presentation should take. If overheads or PowerPoint presentations are to be used, the chair may even request to review the materials to ensure that they will be effectively presented. Contributors should also know when they will be asked to speak, whether they will be asked to field questions, and the context of the item they will address relative to the portions of those in the meeting.