

How to Be a Radically Open Department Head



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By Michael Bugeja December 04, 2019

Some professors go into administration as a career choice, scaling institutional ladders. Some are coerced into serving temporarily as department chair because of rotating-leadership rules. And some professors, like me, do it because we grew weary of being acted upon by supervisors.

In my 14 years as director of the journalism and communication school at Iowa

State University, I sought to avoid that first camp and situate myself squarely in the second. Some of the ways you do that as a leader are obvious: Know institutional policies back to front, especially the faculty handbook; make sure everything you do and propose is in compliance; seek broad input before you adopt any new practice.

But one of my guiding principles as an administrator was not so obvious: Startle everyone with openness.

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Administrators talk a lot about "transparency." But for that word to be more than jargon, you have to live by it and actively promote it. As a faculty member, I was less than satisfied with the candor of my supervisors. The absence of

transparency implied the presence of incompetence. I wanted to be a different sort of leader.

What follows are my 10 best practices for how to be a "radically" open administrator who treats people the way you would like to be treated.

No bombshells at faculty meetings. As a professor, I loathed faculty meetings. Some administrators scheduled them weekly — then used the time to tell us what they had in store for us and called it "consultative governance." Certain faculty members would counter by maximizing the amount of discussion, springing motions on everyone, and sowing discord for the sheer fun of it.

Why so many meetings, anyway? A properly run department or school can operate on one two-hour faculty meeting a month. Occasionally — say, during searches or budget issues — an additional meeting might be necessary. But that should be the exception.

And no surprises should be the rule.

Here's how: Two weeks in advance of a scheduled meeting, put out a call via email for agenda items. Give people a week to respond. That way, you can send faculty members a final agenda before the meeting, allowing everyone time to read through the main motions and attachments.

Another way to avoid surprises: Require every motion to be spelled out in writing and advanced by a committee before it is put to a departmental vote. If faculty members have discussion items they want on the agenda, they either go under "new business" (items requiring an eventual vote) or "other business" (items not requiring a vote).

No special privileges for administrators. We call them "faculty meetings"

for a reason. As a chair or a school director, you have a faculty title — you are a professor among professors. If you want to place a motion on the agenda, go through the same process as everyone else.

Sure, you have to make difficult decisions as chair or director, but that does not entitle you to make them without faculty input. Especially when a particular decision is likely to be unpopular or divisive, potentially affecting morale, you don't have to make the call alone.

Instead: Create a standing advisory committee to guide you. As a component of shared governance, an advisory committee can ease tensions, so long as you don't fill it with your friends. Your advisory panel could include administrative colleagues, such as an associate chair or a budget officer, but also should have professors chosen by faculty vote, such as chairs of standing committees (especially promotion-and-tenure). Be inclusive: Add an assistant professor or a staff member on a rotating basis.

Post meeting agendas on hallway bulletin boards. So much committee work is digital. We get notices about action items and agendas and often overlook them in the email tsunami that defines our workday. Why not post agendas where everyone can see them?

Cork boards have power in academe. They command attention. You pass by them regularly. Students are seen reading the postings and later question you about them. Bulletin boards are symbols of shared governance. So pin things there proudly, including clippings about faculty, student, or departmental honors.

Recognize faculty achievements, commensurate with their scope. In the course of my career, I remember chairs and directors who opted to pick and choose which faculty accomplishments to tout and which to ignore. That always undermined morale. Yet you risk consuming a lot of meeting time if you

try to announce every faculty achievement, no matter how minor.

So use the "applause test" to decide which ones to announce. That is: If the achievement would merit applause, mention it in a faculty meeting. When a professor wins a major award, that merits applause. Getting a paper published does not.

I'm not suggesting that lesser achievements be ignored. Instead, establish a new vehicle for faculty and staff members to self-report their achievements — whether it's research, publications, grants, teaching innovations, service contributions, and internal and external awards. Every month, compile all of that good work into a regular email blast that goes out to the entire department as well as to campus administrators, alumni, and donors.

Feature the really significant ones on the department or program's website. Better still, post each monthly email on the website as a matter of record ([here's how](#) we do it).

Post course and committee assignments before the start of each semester. If a member of the department has received release time from teaching in order to take on some administrative duties, that creates a workload issue for those who have to cover for that faculty member. By sharing such assignments publicly, everyone in a department knows what everyone else is up to.

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This is also a good way to monitor whether committee assignments are being shared fairly. It is important to assess that each semester so as not to overload anyone with service commitments, especially assistant professors who need to focus on research for promotion.

Organize a roundtable for junior scholars. All too often, assistant professors are left out of departmental decisions, usually when it comes to issues of tenure and promotion — a topic continuously on their minds. Junior professors need a committee of their own.

Call it a roundtable and schedule monthly meetings, perhaps on the same day as a full-faculty meeting. The roundtable's purpose should be associated primarily with promotion, but you also can deal with teaching and advising issues, as appropriate. Invite administrators and faculty members from across the campus to attend and discuss career advancement or share best practices for scholarship and grants.

The beauty of this approach is its effectiveness. Assistant professors share methodologies and cohere as a cohort. They learn indirectly about the productivity of peers. Those who "graduate" from the group and later become members of the tenure committee already know the quality of colleagues' work.

Be open about salaries, and resist salary compression. An open hiring process is a vital part of shared governance. Once the department gets the go-ahead for a new faculty line, professors should have a significant role in deciding the focus of the job and hiring someone to fill it. They should even help in negotiating the final offer.

One of the biggest issues in any search is salary range. Ideally, the range for a new position should not create compression — i.e., the new tenure-track hire is paid significantly more than tenured professors in the same department —

except in certain situations, such as an endowed professorship financed by a donor.

So, for example, if assistant-professor salaries in your department average \$65,000, the starting salary for a new hire should be \$60,000 to \$63,000. When it is time to offer the job to your top choice, invite the search committee to be involved. Put the prospect on speaker phone and disclose that colleagues are in the room. Make the atmosphere celebratory. Share the starting salary, usually the advertised maximum. State that there is no room to negotiate a higher amount. If asked, remind the applicant that you take salary compression seriously and that he or she will appreciate the policy once hired.

Open your budget books. Speaking of money, allow faculty and staff members to see how funds are spent. Of course you can't disclose everything (donor information, for example, must remain private) but be prepared to answer questions about expenditures as openly as you can.

There's a plus side to that. Professors will see that most of the budget — often as much as 90 percent — goes to salaries. The rest underwrites things like travel, supplies, and scholarships. It will become very clear that there are no fabled hidden pots of gold in your budget.

Make sure everyone knows how raises are awarded. Perhaps nothing is as potentially explosive as who gets which percentage raise and how that is determined. Create a process for that, too.

Here's a formula: With faculty input, devise a template that evaluates contributions in teaching, research and service on a five-point scale. Then calculate an "overall" score — for example: teaching 4.6; research 4.2; service 4.7; overall, 4.5. Use that figure, multiplied by the percentage increase your department received for salaries, to determine the faculty member's raise.

Whatever is left over can be used to reward merit or deal with salary compression. Be candid about those types of raises, too.

Share your department's metrics online. Use your program's public website to post information about its enrollment, time to degree, postgraduation employment, scholarships, paid versus unpaid internships, and other statistics by which the public can judge your performance. Update those metrics annually.

Yes, such disclosures might mean you are publicizing your weaknesses, but that alone can inspire change and renewed focus.

Last word about radical transparency: If you institute or request it, expect some blowback. Upper administrators may object or even forbid it. Some professors may fight it because they prefer favoritism or cliques. However, once instituted, and accepted as standard operating procedure, your department or school can become a model of shared governance.

That is what higher education is rumored to be about.

Michael Bugeja, a distinguished professor of journalism and communication at Iowa State University, won his college and university outstanding administrator honors along with the 2015 Scripps Howard Administrator of the Year Award.