

# Twelve Tips for Department Chairs

August 29, 2014



Being chair of a department is hard work. Like being a journal editor or a parent, a person not in the situation can vaguely appreciate the difficulty but cannot really know the depth of it until in the role. I have been a chair once, for 8 years. I was an “external hire,” meaning I came into a new department from the outside. I had never previously served as chair. At the time I took the job, I had observed seven chairs of departments at three universities. I thought I knew a few things via observational learning, and I did, but the relevant word in this sentence is few. Many of the tasks that a chair performs are hidden from view to members of the department. One important step I took immediately was to ask a trusted colleague whom I had known for a long time (Dave Balota) to be my associate chair. He could tell me about the folkways and mores of the department and university, because he had years of experience. He kept me from making many blunders.

One of the first jobs of the chair is to create a vision for what he or she wants to accomplish and a realistic plan to move ahead. That plan should include how to bring people along with you, not to dictate to them. I came into a department of 15 members with a brand new building (half empty when I was hired), and the vision of the whole department was to move ahead with hiring and building. When I left the chair’s office, we had 30 faculty and had filled the building. When money is flowing and you have a chance to build, you can enjoy being chair. Yet even under these conditions, it’s not all sunshine and roses, and hiring can be quite stressful as well as rewarding. For every person you hire, you interview maybe four people, and I still vividly remember several candidates we wanted who eluded us.

Of course, the vision for the department depends upon the type of department you are in and what resources are available. Your vision might be to improve your undergraduate program, your research profile, your graduate program (or some combination). Discuss your vision with the faculty and get their input. It all depends on the nature of your department, from small to large, and the mission of your

university.

Another big difference among departments is whether or not you are in a highly democratic department (some have written rules, bylaws, lots of committees, and they vote on everything). Some departments have meetings every week to thrash things out. Other departments, often where the leader is called a “head” rather than a “chair,” expect the head to lead without as much discussion from the department faculty (who like to go about their own work and not be bogged down in debates). My own department calls the leader a “chair,” but the system was more like a head system. My department meets infrequently, and everyone seems to like it that way. Department meetings often produce more heat than light.

My dean was helpful and wonderfully supportive when I came to Washington University, but he taught me one important lesson early on. I was having some particularly vexing problem (now blissfully forgotten) in my second year as chair. I went to my dean, the man who had hired me, for advice. He listened to my problem and, in the course of giving advice, he said, “Remember, the hardest job in the university is being department chair. You frequently have to say ‘no,’ and the people you are saying ‘no’ to are your colleagues, your friends, and the people you live with and see every day. I say ‘no’ a lot as dean, but I don’t live with the people every day the way a chair does.” I told him he hadn’t mentioned this feature of the job when he was hiring me.

Herewith, my 12 tips. Some come from my time being chair, some come from friends, and some come from my role in working with other chairs as an associate dean for some years. Of course, because psychology departments come in all shapes and sizes, some tips will not apply in all cases. Also, although I believe that the tips apply to many chairs in US and Canadian departments, I do not know how applicable they are to psychology departments around the world. Administrative systems may vary widely across the globe.

**1. Start slowly.** Learn your faculty and your department. This is especially good advice — even mandatory advice — for a chair coming in from a different university, but it is good advice for “inside” chairs, too. For the latter, you have been in the department, but not as its leader. You need to understand various sides of any issue before you launch into changing it. Leaping too fast, before you know the landscape, can be a recipe for disaster. Talk to everyone. Listen.

**2. Be upbeat.** The members of the department look to you to set the tone, even if it is a more or less unconscious process. If you want morale to be high, you need to set an example. Even if you are having problems (or maybe even especially if you are), don’t whine and complain. If a chair portrays continual gloom and misery in being chair, the department will pick this up. Emphasize the positive when you can; keep your mouth shut most of the time when you can’t. Keep in mind you want to get someone good to be chair after you are done. If you make the job sound totally unappealing, that will be a tough sell. Don’t overdo positivity when it is unwarranted, of course, but if it is possible to portray a glass as half full, do it.

**3. Be organized; build a calendar of events.** This one sounds like a no-brainer, but you would be surprised. If your personal style has been to be kind of scattered and let others remind you of duties and deadlines, you need to change. You need to control your own schedule and make the most of your time. You cannot afford to let matters slip when other people’s fortunes and careers are riding on your

performance. The academic calendar has a rhythm. Everything is new in the first year as chair, but after that you face the same tasks and the same deadlines every year. Get prepared. Put them on your calendar and put in reminders for the weeks leading up to them. In my university's system, we need to send out letters for tenure and promotion in the summer to have them in by the fall; we need to prepare budget documents in the fall for a meeting with the dean and the dean's budget officer in December; we need to evaluate performance of junior professors in February so we can get a letter to them by mid-March. And so on. The calendar of events (which the prior chair can help you with) is critical to good organization.

**4. Develop an effective staff and treat them well.** Nearly every department in which I have served has had a few effective staff members who kept the place on track. Depending on the size of the department, the chair may have an assistant, a budget officer for personnel, a grants person, and assistants for other purposes (undergraduate studies, graduate studies, the clinical program). The cooperation and attitude of the staff and how they interact with you and faculty help to determine how well the department runs. Consult the staff, respect them, and value them, from the maintenance crew on up.

**5. Get along with the dean.** The former chair of a major department recently told me that his biggest surprise in becoming chair was how important his relationship with his dean was. In hindsight, he said, this should have been obvious — but prospectively he had not recognized it. In most university systems, department chairs can get little done without the support of the dean. You need to work on that relationship, even if (or maybe especially if) you find it painful. If you get in a big fight with the dean (or lose her trust), your department will suffer and you will have more sleepless nights than would be good for your health. Remember, in most systems, the chair serves at the pleasure of the dean.

**6. Cultivate relationships with other chairs.** Yes, in a way they are your rivals. It is your job (and their job) to get more than your (or their) fair share of the budget. But you need allies and confidantes. In coming in as an outside chair, I was fortunate that several current chairs in other departments took me under their wings and instructed me on various items I should know.

**7. Learn the critical phrase, "I'll get back to you on that."** A faculty member (Y) comes flying into your office in an uproar. "You won't believe what X has done now. You have to do something." Y and X have a long history of this kind of thing. First, calm Y down. Second, say you will investigate and learn about the situation and get back to him or her. Say you are busy and it might take a couple of days. Often Y will calm down and it will blow over, but of course you do need to investigate (with X and with neutral parties, preferably those who witnessed the event in question). Then, of course, do get back to Y with your thoughts on the matter. Maybe some corrective action does need to be taken. However, many academic flaps can be ameliorated with the passing of time and some discussion. The point is, never act on an important issue after hearing only one side of a story. There are always two sides. This rule is frequently violated in my experience. Just because someone wants you to take some immediate action does not mean you need to do it — the opposite is often the case. Be deliberate — but do get the issue resolved within a short time frame whenever possible. Saying "I'll get back to you" means you should.

**8. Walk around.** Don't just sit in your office, waiting for news and issues to come to you. Wander around the department several times a week. Stop and chat here and there. Talk to students and staff. Find out what's going on. Attend some of the area brown bags and talks in your department even if they are outside your academic area of interest. Try to keep up with what is happening in the various areas of the field that are represented in your department, too. Take an interest.

**9. Set an example.** Let's say you need to encourage your faculty in certain behaviors — attending colloquia outside their areas, teaching enthusiastically, being around the department and not hiding at home, spending time with students, and so on. Well, make it a point (as much as you can) to follow these same rules. Don't say, "I'm too busy to teach and attend colloquia." Maybe your teaching will be light, but don't make a habit of not following the practices you expect of others. Everyone is busy.

**10. Say "no" nicely.** You wind up having to say "no" a lot, because people ask for favors ("But it's me! I'm different.") or they ask for money for some special (or not so special) purpose. And so on. And often it is the same few faculty who make repeated requests. (A rough estimate among chairs is that 10% of the faculty consume 80% of your time.) Of course, you want to do what you can to support good ideas and move the faculty members, their careers, and your department forward, but your budget will not permit you to do everything. And policies of fairness and equity should prevent you from cutting special deals for some faculty over equally worthy faculty. Still, even when I had to say "no," I tried to do it in a way that was not dismissive of faculty members' concerns. I found that often they had ideas I would have supported had the funds been available.

**11. Remember George Burns's advice.** Burns was an American comedian who lived to be 100 and was noted for many things, including the following aphorism: "The secret of success is sincerity. Once you can fake that you've got it made." When you are chair, some situations you face are just too boring or depressing for words. You have the same pathetic meeting with the same people over the same issues that will never be settled, in your lifetime, to the satisfaction of everyone involved. You can attend the meeting and sit with your arms folded and your bored, frowny face on, or you can just embrace the moment and pitch in to the hopeless situation. Why not? Try to enjoy it. This advice is even more critical for the upper administration than for chairs. Think of all those fundraising dinners.

**12. Know when to say "time's up" for being chair.** Departments differ in their practices on rotations for chairs. The 3-year rotation is popular in some places, but to me that seems too short. About the time you know what you are doing, you are finished. For someone who maintains his or her enthusiasm, 6 years or more may work. But if you feel your attention and enthusiasm fading, it's time to move on and let someone else take over.

One question I have eluded is, "Why should I want to be chair? I am interested in my research and teaching." There are many answers: to make a difference, to try to make the department a better place, or even because your department asked you to do it. (When people asked me, my answer was "Ever since I was a child, I dreamed of a job in lower middle management.") Some people who become chairs learn that they like administration and seek to move on to become deans, provosts, and presidents. Bravo! We need great leaders to move up. Others of us learn that we like remaining in our academic fields. Beyond chair, it is (in my observation) impossible to really stay in both your academic field and be an administrator. You will have to choose when you step down from being chair (or somewhat before you do).