# Encouraging Faculty Collegiality

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**Abstract**

**In higher education, faculty members often work in isolation in academic departments that are sometimes more fragmented than united in purpose. The frequent result is decreased effectiveness for the university as a whole. This article discusses environmental factors that discourage cooperative behavior among faculty members and suggests four strategies that educational leaders can use to encourage collegial interaction.**

Organizations frequently encourage members to participate in group activities in order to complete some task or ensure involvement of staff. Businesses often have employees grouped in teams as they pursue various assignments. The benefits of group participation seem generally accepted. Yet in higher education,

faculty members often work in isolation in academic departments that are sometimes more fragmented than united in purpose. The result is decreased effectiveness for individuals, departments, colleges, and ultimately, the university as a whole. The following discussion details environmental factors that discourage cooperative behavior among faculty members and suggests strategies educational leaders can use to encourage collegiality.

## Factors That Inhibit Collegiality

Many pressures influence faculty members to behave as isolates. There is pressure to research, publish, and present while also maintaining quality teaching along with an expectation for community, college, and departmental service. These pressures in turn lead to competition among faculty members for merit raises, tenure, promotion, and desirable course assignments. Reward systems frequently promote individual or narrow agendas instead of addressing departmental or college goals. To fight this fragmentation, some approach is needed that can satisfy both individual and group goals and interests (Burkett, 1994).

A limited amount of research has been directed toward discovering the causes of faculty members' isolation. Massey, Wilger, and Colbeck (1994) interviewed a sample of approximately 300 faculty members at 15 different United States colleges and universities to gain insight into the faculty members' work environments. These schools consisted of research institutions, doctorate-granting institutions, and liberal arts colleges with fairly equal numbers of faculty members in science, social science, and humanities departments. Results indicated that faculty members often work in environments that hinder their ability to work together, especially on issues involving undergraduate teaching and learning. They discovered patterns of interactions, all crossing different institutional types and departmental lines, and identified three key characteristics that inhibit faculty members' collegiality:

> 1. Fragmented communication patterns which isolate faculty members and discourage them from interacting.
>
> 2. Lack of resources that limit opportunities and also discourages interaction.
>
> 3. Traditional evaluation and reward systems that further strain faculty members relationships.

<u>Unproductive Communication Patterns</u>

Results from the Massey et al. (1994) study revealed several principle elements behind unproductive communication patterns. One element is faculty members autonomy. Higher education often encourages faculty members to work alone. The existence of flexible schedules that have the potential to increase productivity can also hinder peer interaction. Another element that tends to encourage isolation is specialization. Beginning in doctoral programs, faculty members work in narrowly defined sub-areas that can make it difficult for faculty members to discuss their work with others assigned to diversified departments.

A third element that hinders communication is an apparent unwillingness to confront potentially divisive or unpleasant issues. What results is a "veneer of civility" (p. 12) that covers true feelings and often results in anger and frustration that, in turn, further break down the possibility for productive interactions among faculty members. Generational differences also contribute fragmented communication patterns. Competition for raises, disciplinary philosophy, course loads, scholarship, and assignments create additional distance between faculty members.

<u>Resource Allocation</u>

Adding more pressure to strained relationships is the competition for dwindling resources. Obtaining money for travel, technology, equipment, instructional materials, research–things once taken for granted–is now increasingly competitive and pits faculty members against faculty members. Faculty members compete for tenure and promotion, sometimes making the overall environment more competitive than cooperative. Traditional resource allocation based upon documented performance can fuel a desire for secrecy, guarded idea sharing, and positioning for program or service visibility.

Evaluation and Reward Systems

Some faculty members view the traditional evaluation and reward system as creating problems in cooperating with peers. The importance of research in most evaluation and reward systems has combined with other work environmental factors to result in faculty members' isolation, partly because many faculty members view research as a competitive rather than a cooperative activity. It is not uncommon for those receiving course load buy-outs, adjusted teaching-load assignments, additional graduate assistant and secretarial support, and increased travel funding to be viewed as elite and in some instances, they also behave accordingly. This behavior can result in more isolation.

Some faculty members view salary differences as divisive. These perceptions can have negative effect on faculty members' morale and commitment (Scott & Bereman, 1992). While sensitive to intrinsic rewards, faculty members are also sensitive to extrinsic rewards. When dissatisfied with their salaries, faculty members will act to improve them. As a result, many faculty members will shift their emphasis when it comes to the investment of their time and effort. If administration and research personnel seem to be more valued within the reward system, many will choose to reduce commitment to teaching, advising, or service in favor of more lucrative activities. Some faculty members shift their energies to outside employment to supplement their salaries.

The overall climate in some university departments encourages competition instead of cooperation. Competition among faculty members who perceive they are receiving ample resource support and faculty members who perceive they are not often discourages communication and a cooperative spirit.

## Organizational Influences on Collegiality

To promote changes that will encourage collegial behavior in faculty members, an organization needs to examine its own behavior. An organization's people will stimulate collegial behavior among individuals to the extent that it creates an appropriate environment. An organization's most effective means of influence is its own behavior, as it tends to serve as a role model for its members (Knowles, 1990).

An essential component of a collegial organization is mentoring and appropriate modeling by leaders within academic units. If one of an organization's purposes is to encourage faculty members to collaborate to accomplish both individual and group goals, it is likely to succeed to the extent to which individuals in leadership positions model the role of collegial behavior and create an atmosphere in which positive, collaborative behavior thrives. Table 1, adapted from Knowles (1990), summarizes administrative behaviors that can encourage or discourage collegial behavior among faculty members.

Massey et al. (1994) described certain characteristics of university departments that successfully encourage collegiality among faculty members. These characteristics include: (a) supportive culture; (b) frequent interaction; (c) tolerance of differences; (d) consensus decision-making; (e) generational equity; (f) workload equity; and (g) balanced incentives for mission-focused performance.

Attention toward improving elements involving any of the above seven characteristics should improve the working context within which collegial relationships exist. While each of the seven areas is important, fostering a supportive culture may be the most global point from which to address collegial behaviors. Gibb (1961) described defensive and supportive climates in his classic summary of eight years of research in interpersonal and group relationships. Each climate can be identified by specific behaviors exhibited by

members of a group and adapted to an academic environment. Table 2 summarizes Gibb's defensive and supportive climates. Collegiality may be improved when administrators move toward decreasing defensive behaviors and increasing supportive or more positive behaviors.

## Strategies to Help Improve Faculty Members' Collegiality

Specific activities that can improve collegiality include the use of (a) positive communication networks; (b) mission-focused allocation of resources: (c) collaborative, team-oriented

Table 1

Characteristics of Closed and Collaborative Organizations

| Dimensions | Characteristics | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | Closed Organizations | Collaborative Organizations |
| Organization | • Rigid–much energy devoted to maintaining permanent departments, committees.<br>• Adherence to tradition; reluctance to change. | · Flexible–much use of temporary committees; easy shifting of departmental lines.<br>· Readiness to change and depart from tradition. |
| Communication Climate | • Task-centered.<br>• Impersonal, cold, formal, reserved; suspicious.<br>• Restricted flow.<br>• One-way; downward.<br>• Emotions repressed, hidden.<br>• Isolation.<br>• Generational inequity.<br>• Defensive. | · People-centered.<br>· Caring, warm, informal; trusting.<br>· Open flow; easy access.<br>· Multidirectional.<br>· Feelings expressed.<br>· Frequent interaction.<br>· Generational equity.<br>· Supportive. |
| Leadership | • Control of faculty through coercive power.<br>• Cautious–low risk taking in order to avoid errors.<br>• Emphasis on personnel selection.<br>• Self-sufficient; closed system regarding sharing resources; emphasis on conserving resources.<br>• Low tolerance for ambiguity. | · Encouraging faculty creativity and productivity through supportive use of power.<br>· Experimental–risk taking; errors are learning experiences.<br>· Emphasis on faculty development.<br>· Interdependency; open system regarding sharing resources.<br>· High tolerance for ambiguity. |
| Decision/ policy-making | • High participation at the top; low participation at the bottom.<br>• Clear distinction made between policy making and policy execution.<br>• Decision making by legalistic mechanisms.<br>• Decisions viewed as final. | · Relevant participation by all affected.<br>· Collaborative policy making and policy execution.<br>· Decision making by problem solving.<br>· Decisions viewed as hypotheses to be tested. |

decision-making; (d) positive mentoring; and (e) consideration of career anchors as a tool for improving faculty members' motivation.

Positive Communications

In addition to improving the tone and increasing the involvement of others in reviewing existing formal communications (e.g., evaluation forms, surveys, memos, and other informational outlets) take advantage of informal networks in the workplace. Using an invitation instead of a directive or command creates a more positive context within which to make decisions (Hoerr, 1996). Requesting input or inviting solutions from those concerned may help dilute the blame or share the glory when a situation has been unsuccessfully or successfully addressed.

Table 2

Summary of Gibb's Defensive and Supportive Climates

| Communication Climates | |
|---|---|
| Defensive | Supportive |
| Evaluation – passing judgment; questioning standards, values, motives | Description – being non-judgmental; presenting information without calling for or implying changes in others. |
| Control – trying to do something to another and change the attitudes and behaviors of others. | Problem-orientation – defining mutual problems and seeking solutions without inhibiting others' goals, decisions, or progress. |
| Strategy – using manipulation, trickery. | Spontaneity – being free of deception; having no hidden motives or agendas; honest and straightforward. |
| Neutrality – showing a lack of concern for others' welfare or concerns. | Equality – having mutual trust and respect; engaging in participative planning without undue influence of power or status. |
| Superiority – showing an attitude of superiority in position, or intellectual ability which arouses feelings of inadequacy in others. | Empathy – respecting the worth of others; identifying, sharing, and accepting the problems, feelings, or values of others. |
| Certainty – showing dogmatism; the need to be right. | Provisionalism – willingness to experiment with one's own behaviors, attitudes, and ideas. |

Rakes and Cox (1993) provided nine suggestions for improving informal or "grapevine" communications. These included recommending the use of drop-in visits to faculty members' offices and secretarial areas with no set agenda except to stop and talk for a few minutes; refraining from making judgmental comments and instead, focusing on listening and gaining information; taking frequent opportunities to send informal memos or notes of encouragement or acknowledgment for achievements; and not using casual comments or remarks that may mislead other people.

Mission-Focused Resource Allocators

Mistrust and suspicion are sometimes generated when decisions about resources or assignments are made in the absence of clearly stated standards, expectations, or performance indicators. Informing others about unit priorities, rating scales, and evaluation procedures is essential to limit misunderstandings and to help preserve a climate of equity when travel, supplies, equipment, and personnel budgets are involved. If collaboration within or among departments is a priority, some portion of available resources should be channeled to those individuals who participate in collaborative efforts that are directed toward the overall mission of a department and college.

## Collaborative, Team-Oriented Decision Making

In addition to adjusting resource allocations to encourage collaborative efforts, faculty members can be motivated to work in teams by (a) assigning tasks or making committee assignments based, in part, with consideration for pairs or triads of more likely compatible faculty members; (b) initiating as many tasks as possible by enlisting volunteers to serve or represent a unit; (c) having administrators specifically enlist teaching faculty members to collaborate with them on tasks; and (d) taking opportunities to acknowledge individuals publicly and privately who are involved in projects, committees, partnerships, and team-based efforts.

When leaders encourage multiple sources of input including faculty members, students, and if appropriate, support staff, planning and decision making become more productive. Hoerr (1996) suggested power sharing as a means of improving the work climate. The decision-making process can become an empowering, collegial process when administrators take time to share ideas and actively enlist ideas from others.

## Positive Mentoring

Mentoring can be successful on several educational levels. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) described common problems associated with mentoring and Tierney and Rhoads (1994) cited a number of university-based projects or programs that involved successful mentoring components. Keep in mind that all mentoring need not be formal in nature. In fact, mentoring frequently takes place in the absence of a formalized program of assigned and trained mentors. A faculty member may have one or more informal mentors who may or may not be aware that they are serving this function for someone else. Long-term collaborative relationships may grow from a mentoring context, although this type of relationship is not essential for successful collaborative efforts. One common element in a successful mentoring relationship is that both parties are interested in learning, supporting, and contributing effort to sustain a mutually beneficial professional project or effort.

## Considering Career Anchors as Tools for Improving Collegiality

Faculty members need motivation to change existing behaviors and move toward collegial behaviors. In discussing faculty members' motivation, Lucas (1994) referred to career anchors (Schein, 1990) that are compelling, driving forces or needs that tend to govern or focus a person's professional motivation. Consider four types of career anchors when dealing with faculty members' motivation: (a) technical and functional competence; (b) service and dedication; (c) autonomy; and (d) lifestyle integration. In an Australian study, competency, and service and dedication were found to be critical (Little & Peter, 1990). This could indicate a need to consider these two factors when specifically designating committees that are expected to work collaboratively or when groups or department faculty members are organized for long or short-term activities.

We would also suggest a person's need for autonomy as an important factor to consider as it could have a negative impact on collegial relationships. In practice, we believe that few higher-education administrators give much consideration to career anchors in seeking to motivate or improve collegiality among their faculty members. Unlike other suggestions in this section, we believe that consideration of faculty

members' career anchors may be more of a contributing factor than other more process or managerial-related suggestions.

## Conclusion

Many factors in traditional higher education environments encourage isolation among faculty members. To promote collegial interaction, organizational leadership needs to provide faculty members with role models for cooperative behavior and establish an organizational climate in which such behavior can thrive.

Collegial organizations emphasize consensus, shared power, consultation, and collective responsibilities where status differences are downplayed and people interact as equals. People in these organizations share their expectations and commitments and have frequent, productive interactions (Massey et al., 1994).

When faculty members support, trust, respect, encourage one another, and choose to work together, professional opportunities for growth and improvement are created. Collaboration leads to more and better planning and productivity. Shared goals lead to common expectations and standards. Unless faculty members talk to one another, observe one another, and help one another, very little positive change will occur (Krovetz & Cohick, 1993).

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