Chair Leading and Cheerleading in a Medical School: A Guide to Administrative Longevity

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Introduction. Leading an academic department of a medical college is not for everyone. Having done it for 25 years, having enjoyed it for 25 years, and having, I believe, been successful in doing it for 25 years, I have decided to share my thoughts with others and codify, so to speak, my perspective within the confines of this essay. The stimulus for doing this was my recent realization that I have been leading my department (now called a “center”) longer than any other Chair or academic leader (our basic science Chairs are now called “directors”) in my institution. Of the 17 other Chairpersons that were in office when I was recruited in 1984, all have resigned, retired or otherwise left the position of Chair; to my knowledge, only one is still an employee of the medical college. During these many years I have also witnessed five changes of the Dean of the medical college and four changes of the CEO of the medical center. So what, I ask, is right or wrong about me? Why and/or how have I persisted in doing what I have been doing for so long? What lessons have I learned?

There are many answers to the questions I have posed, and I will try to address them in a rational order. The first answer is relatively trivial but needs to be mentioned.

Stay out of trouble. Trouble in an academic context can come in many forms, from simply arguing too much and antagonizing someone above you (the Dean in this case) to committing some form of academic malfeasance (e.g., plagiarism). However, the one kind of trouble that most commonly shortens one’s tenure as a Chairperson is the mismanagement of money. There are many ways to make monetary mistakes, from simply overspending one’s budget to purchasing inappropriate (i.e., personal) items to collecting consultant income from questionable or unethical sources posing a conflict of interest. Although arguably overreacting, institutions (my own included) commonly respond to such infractions with new, broadly construed rules that are designed to prevent future recurrences of similar events; however, sometimes these rules can be so restrictive, and the paperwork involved so laborious, that faculty and Chairs are discouraged from participating in potentially productive and ethical ventures. Staying out of trouble is clearly a balancing act—it requires a judicious sense of knowing when a small risk (e.g., supporting a position unpopular with the Dean’s office) is a reasonable means to a worthwhile end.

Learn to delegate. One person can not, and should not, do it all. Delegation requires trust, and it is essential to have both faculty and staff who can be trusted. It works well only when it goes in both directions. The people you trust have to be able to trust you as well. This means keeping your word, always doing (or at least trying to do) what you say you will do, and keeping people informed about events that concern them. It is no small task to find and keep an administrative assistant and/or executive secretary who is competent and dedicated. When you find this person, and you will eventually, never lose sight of his or her value; nurture the relationship by providing rewards (e.g., pay raises, annual performance reviews) whenever possible and strive to let this person know on a continuing basis that he or she is critical to the success of your department’s mission. The same approach applies to faculty, albeit in a broader sense. It is important for faculty members to have a stake in the department, to feel proud of the department, to feel that they are the department. People in
general prefer to do things that they want to do, or at least decide to do, rather than things that someone tells them to do. A department works better, and is a better place in which to work, when the faculty members have a substantial role in running the department.

Establish and maintain key advisory committees. In addition to delegating particular tasks to individual people, it is important to create a departmental governance consisting of several advisory committees. That is, committees of faculty (some with staff and student representatives) should be involved in major decision making with regard to appointment and promotion of faculty, graduate student affairs (e.g., recruitment, monitoring of grades and laboratory performance), construction of major exams (major medical school courses as well as qualifying exams for graduate students), selection of candidates for endowed visiting professorships, and even oversight of major departmental equipment (e.g., centrifuges, scintillation counters, freezers, microscopes, cryostats etc.). Technically, the decisions of such committees are only advisory to the Chair; however, in my own experience, such decisions have seemed reasonable and correct more than 99% of the time (in 25 years, I can only recall two instances in which I ignored or reversed a committee decision). In addition to providing good decisions about important issues, the committee structure imparts a substantial degree of stability to the department by making it clear to everyone that the department carries out its functions in a rational way.

Be accessible. I have always had an open door policy. This means that if the door to my office is open, anyone is free to walk in and talk to me for whatever reason. I will usually close the door if an extended conversation ensues—and this lets everyone else know that someone is with me. Many Chairs cannot tolerate the potential for being interrupted many times throughout the day. They keep their doors closed and insist on having their secretaries schedule appointments for any and all meetings. I have even known two Chairs who had red and green lights mounted above the doors to their offices. People were only permitted to knock when the green light was on. This kind of formality can be intimidating, discouraging people (faculty, staff and students) from seeking advice and guidance from the Chair. Eventually the Chair becomes insulated from his/her constituency; and it is difficult to provide effective leadership when people feel that the Chair has little genuine interest in their welfare. Being accessible is extremely important. If you cannot deal with the interruption that an open door policy entails, I would advise you not to become a Chair.

Use first names, be friendly. Although this piece of advice sounds almost too obvious and trivial to mention, it is neither. Many Chairs believe that their esteemed position carries enormous respect, requiring them to maintain a certain degree of formality when interacting with faculty, staff and students. Formalities promote distance, leading people to view the Chair as intimidating and/or unconcerned with everyday problems. The Chair may be the last to learn that the ice machine is broken, that a favored student is failing, or that a staff member is getting married. Students in particular are almost always intimidated by the Chair on Day 1. Using first names sends an immediate signal that the Chair is not to be feared or avoided—students will quickly realize this and Day 1 will not become Day Forever. In the long run, a liked, friendly Chair will be more effective than one whose concern for being respected makes him/her unapproachable.

Be cheerful (avoid constantly forecasting gloom) but realistic (i.e., be honest). It is no secret that some people are more optimistic than others. In my opinion Chairpersons should not be pessimists, and pessimists should not become Chairpersons. Yes, there is a need for some constant cheerleading. It is difficult or impossible to motivate people to interact productively if the Chair is always reminding them
that the odds of success are low. For example, the fact that only 15-20% of NIH grant applications are funded is daunting enough. The Chair’s role is to mitigate the impact of this fact by finding ways to help faculty make their applications more competitive (e.g., by having them critiqued by colleagues before submission). A Chair who makes no effort to help but simply reminds faculty to expect the worst is not only pessimistic but also masochistic. It is hard to believe that such Chairpersons even exist, but they do (although usually not for very long).

Keep everyone informed. Many Chairs have a tendency to treat their faculty like children, as if they are too young or naïve to be able to handle difficult truths. These Chairs also typically avoid telling their faculty anything that is not absolutely definite, inferring that their faculty cannot deal with uncertainties. This kind of paternalistic policy backfires more than not. In my experience people (faculty included) would rather hear about something—whether good, bad or indifferent—sooner rather than later, and for at least two reasons. First, they want to have some input into the decision making process, or at least the opportunity to provide some input; this opportunity implies respect, an indication that the institution values employees’ work and commitment. And second, particularly if something unpleasant is about to happen (e.g., a freeze or cut in salaries), the more time people have to get used to the new reality the better—people can then plan their lives more thoughtfully. Simply put, people usually do not like surprises in the workplace.

Do your share of the work (e.g., teaching). Being a Chair carries a substantial administrative workload—there’s no denying this. However, some Chairs use this as an excuse for not doing some things typically expected of all other faculty members. Teaching is perhaps the most common task that Chairs may attempt to avoid. Not pulling one’s weight in this respect can have dire repercussions, inasmuch as other faculty members will have to work harder as a result. However, the most serious result is that resentment will accrue, and the Chair will gradually lose credibility (and respect) with the faculty.

Have regular faculty meetings. Faculty meetings should accomplish much more than simply providing a pulpit from which the Chair can make announcements and pronouncements. The essence of a good (i.e., constructive) faculty meeting is discussion. While the Chair might indeed announce new institutional rules or policies, it is the faculty’s discussion of those policies that makes the meeting worth having. In many ways the Chair is the faculty’s ombudsman, both representing and advocating for the faculty with the administration (the Dean et al.). The discussion at a department meeting gives the Chair the information he/she needs to deal effectively with the administration. Such a discussion also gives the individual faculty members an accurate view of institutional plans. Subjects may include renovation and building proposals, faculty salary adjustments, new rules regarding grant and contract accounting, and even new requirements for safety training. While most matters will be non-controversial, others may arouse considerable objections, inspiring the Chair to raise such issues with the administration. Faculty meetings also provide a forum for exchange of committee reports and consequent discussion of purely departmental concerns (e.g., whether a limit should be placed on how many graduate students can be mentored per faculty member; whether a new piece of major equipment is really needed etc.). Although unnecessary meetings can always be cancelled if there is nothing new to report or discuss, having meetings scheduled for the same time and day each month confers a degree of stability on the department, in that the faculty will expect and appreciate updates on important matters on a routine basis. And, by the way, unnecessary meetings should indeed be cancelled—meaningless meetings are a waste of everyone’s time and will eventually lead to poor attendance at all meetings.
Manage efficiently—get tasks done on a timely basis. Departmental offices handle a great deal of administrative paperwork and respond to numerous queries, complaints, and crises. Being chronically in the midst of potential confusion, it is important for the office staff to have a clear sense of priorities. Some tasks are trivial yet important, like distributing the mail soon after it arrives. Others can have crucial long-term consequences, like delivering grant applications to the research office in time for them to be processed for an upcoming deadline. The faculty need to know that the departmental office is there to help them and need to be able to trust the staff to get things done on time. In this respect the Chairperson is himself/herself a role model. By getting things done efficiently, the Chair lets both the faculty and staff know that this is the routine or style to be expected. The Chair is ordinarily required to sign a myriad of forms, letters, and applications. Signing things quickly, not letting piles of unsigned documents develop, lets everyone know that you’re efficient and user-friendly. This really simple practice sets the tone for how the office functions.

Be a strong advocate for your department. A Chair should do everything possible to help faculty get resources (space, funding, equipment etc.). While this responsibility may seem to be an obvious part of the job description, too many Chairs are obsessed with getting resources for their own research programs and pay little attention to the needs of their faculty. Indeed, in the extreme, some Chairs view their departments as their personal empires, even to the extent that recruitment of faculty is designed to support and enhance the Chair’s own research program. Sooner or later the narrow scope and other deficiencies (e.g., lack of suitably broad teaching expertise) of an “empire department” become apparent to the Dean and his/her staff. The empire usually does not last long thereafter. On the other hand, when a Chair nourishes his/her faculty, uses departmental resources where they are most needed, and recruits people who can interact while maintaining their own identities, success and longevity are almost certain to occur. Successful Chairs frequently exhibit an outlook that is distinctly paternal or maternal; if not overdone or intrusive (e.g., meddling in personal matters), this attitude can have a very positive influence on the department. From the Chair’s perspective, a major source of satisfaction is derived from the vicarious thrill of watching (and helping) young faculty mature and succeed. The ability to experience this “thrill” should perhaps be a prerequisite for Chair candidates.

Build a balanced department: Successful departments usually have three to five areas of strength. Except maybe for the largest institutions, it is usually impossible to cover all aspects of a discipline. Unless inheriting a mature and completely formed department, one of the Chair’s major responsibilities is to shape the research topography of the department. The choice of which areas to build will have long-ranging consequences, affecting the quality of faculty and students recruited and ultimately the national and international reputation of the department. Perhaps equally important as the particular research areas developed is the range and kind of technical expertise represented among the faculty. While some departments may focus exclusively on molecular approaches, others may encompass a broad range of in vitro and in vivo methodology, including molecular, structural, chemical and analytical, functional and behavioral. My bias is clearly to be more inclusive, believing that no single approach to any problem or disease is going to provide all the answers to all the questions that need to be asked. To me, building a balanced department means establishing three to five research areas that are representative of the discipline and, across those research areas, making sure that there is expertise among the faculty that is representative of the range of available technology. When both objectives are well accomplished, an important fringe benefit ensues, namely collaboration. Faculty members having different kinds of expertise naturally seek each other’s help and a considerable amount of cross
fertilization eventually occurs. Faculty members become involved in each other’s research areas and sometimes entirely new projects are spawned as a result. This in turn creates and sustains a productive and vibrant department.

Accept some personal idiosyncrasies. Academicians may sometimes be strange, obnoxious, or otherwise unusual people. They may have large egos, be opinionated, be prone to nonstop talking or, at the other extreme, be shy, reclusive, and uncommunicative in non-scientific settings. What matters most for the sake of the department is how well faculty members perform their roles and responsibilities. “Productivity” is usually the word that is used to summarize a faculty member’s overall performance. “Productive” faculty members publish regularly, maintain substantial extramural funding, teach well, and serve on a number of committees. In addition, the quality and quantity of patient care is certainly a major ingredient in clinical faculty productivity. Of all the productivity measures, the number of dollars earned (via grants and/or clinical activity) has increasingly become the most important index of productivity to medical school administrators. Inasmuch as the availability of money influences virtually everything that happens in a medical school, this is hardly a surprise. A pervasive problem is that missions generating relatively little income (e.g., teaching) often suffer as a result. To keep everything working properly requires that departments try to balance all of their activities, making efficient use of all their faculty members’ strengths and abilities. This may mean that a faculty member who teaches a great deal may have only a small research program with little and/or sporadic grant income whereas a faculty member who does little teaching may have a very large and well funded research program. Departments can accomplish their missions with many different combinations of different kinds of faculty. To attract and keep a faculty member with a particular strength may mean that his/her slightly objectionable personal characteristics have to be tolerated or ignored. Thus the super teacher may be prone to tell too many bad jokes while the super scientist may refuse to go to meaningless meetings of some committees. There is of course a limit as to how much deviant behavior can be accommodated. My point is that scholarship, talent and productivity come first and that occasional idiosyncrasies should be tolerated as long as they are not disruptive to a collegial environment.

Make terminations (both staff and faculty) and other “hard decisions” when warranted. Many people in leadership positions have difficulty leading because they simply cannot say “no.” While it is important to recognize a new faculty member’s potential brilliance and provide as much support as possible, it is equally important to recognize a looming disaster and make a definitive decision to end a faculty member’s unsuccessful trial period. It is indeed painful to acknowledge that a faculty member is not going to work out, particularly since it may take 3-5 years to find out. A substantial commitment of time, money and resources is generally associated with hiring a new faculty member. Recognizing that this person is not a good “fit” for the department is tantamount to acknowledging failure, not something people (Chairs included) like to do. However, not acknowledging such a situation at an appropriate time only makes it that much worse at a later time. The worst case scenario is that a nonproductive faculty member is not dismissed at all—the department and the institution will then suffer for many years to come. A similar situation applies to staff, and as one result, some departmental offices may become notoriously ineffective and inefficient because the Chair refuses to acknowledge that his/her administrative assistant, secretary, or budget manager is not doing an adequate job. Other difficult kinds of decisions may pertain to the reallocation of research space (taking it away from someone and giving it to another), the use of limited departmental funds to purchase equipment for one research program vs. another, and the designation of one faculty member vs. others to deliver a particular lecture. Making hard decisions is indisputably hard, but it is also an obligatory attribute of a Chair; it not
only comes with the territory, it is part of the territory.

Be fair (do not have “favorites” or at least do not behave as if you do). It is very important for the Chair to be viewed by faculty, staff and students as being even-handed, considerate and fair to all. Fairness dictates that people be judged on their merits not on their appearances, political views, or senses of humor (or lack thereof). Of course, like everyone else, Chairpersons have likes and dislikes, preferences and prejudices. However, care should be taken to avoid having these biases influence the allocation of resources and the outcomes of other “hard decisions” (above). Aside from the intrinsic benefits of making fair and wise decisions, doing so prevents the Chair from being treated disingenuously by other people. When the Chair is known to act impulsively, basing decisions more on bias and whim than on reason, people quickly learn how to ingratiate themselves and win “points” redeemable for favors. Over time this can produce a remarkably unhealthy atmosphere in the department as a result of people constantly vying for the Chair’s attention. Intrigue and resentment (“haves” vs. “have nots”) may become the mainstay of personal interactions to the extent that overall productivity of the department is severely compromised.

Publicize faculty accomplishments (both internally and externally). A good Chair is in fact a good cheerleader. Keeping morale high and healthy is good for everyone. In my experience people work harder and are more productive if they value their place of employment, respect the work that is being done, and are proud to contribute to it. Getting a new grant or publishing a paper is important news that everyone in the department should see or hear. There are a variety of ways such information can and should be disseminated, both inside and outside the department. Internally, while department-wide emails are sometimes appropriate and useful, hard copy evidence can be more effective and long lasting. Bulletin boards (and many of them) mounted on the walls along the major hallways can be a practical and appealing way to convey an overall sense of the department’s accomplishments. Some bulletin boards may be used for news articles about faculty and pictures of recent events while others may be posters (e.g., from recent national meetings) showing the latest research findings. A weekly emailed calendar of events as a well as a monthly department newsletter (hard copy) are also helpful. On the external side of things, the Chair should make certain that faculty achievements (e.g., new grants, important papers, awards received etc.) are communicated to the institution’s public relations department and well publicized throughout the academic community as well as the general public if appropriate. The demonstrable successes associated with doing research, being far and few between, deserve to be publicized. Doing so shows the faculty that the institution appreciates what they do, and this in turn will foster morale and enhance faculty commitment to the institution.

Host at least one annual party. I have saved the fun for last. People are more likely to work more effectively together, and enjoy working together, if they also have fun together. An annual party, preferably held around the holidays in December, can be a big morale booster; another one, perhaps a picnic in the summer, is also a good idea. Aside from making it easier for people to get to know each other better in a more relaxed atmosphere, a party can especially help the Chair appear friendlier, more approachable, and just more “human” in general. Parties are not only fun—they also foster a sense of belonging and allegiance to the department.

Concluding Comments: Opportunities and Rewards. Being a Chairperson over a long period of time is like being in charge of building a house, except that your role is viewed as a combination of architect, contractor, building inspector, owner and occupant all in one. Of course not all Chair positions start out
this way; in many cases the house is already built and the new Chair is at best in charge of renovations. However, if the Chair’s tenure in the position is long enough (7-8 years plus), the differences between new construction and renovation are few—a new edifice will emerge regardless. Perhaps needless to say, there are many frustrations in being a Chairperson. There are never enough dollars, enough people, and enough space to do everything that one wants to do; and, annoyingly, there are countless rules and regulations, both internal and external, which need to be abided by and enforced. Nevertheless, the opportunity to accomplish something important is always present, and the rewards of doing so more than compensate for whatever drawbacks there might be. Establishing a strong and effective medical teaching program, designing and implementing a rigorous graduate training program, and recruiting young faculty who mature and develop outstanding research programs are just three of the more obvious indices of long-term success. The smaller, daily rewards are also many, for example, watching a third year graduate student present a superb seminar or seeing one of your faculty quoted in the news media about a paper he/she just published in Science, Nature or PNAS. Like building a house, constructing and shaping a department is a long-term project; but departing somewhat from the metaphor, a good Chairperson never quite finishes the job, because, fortunately, the job is never done.