As I reflect on my first year as department chair, the 1980s cereal commercial starring the gullible “Mikey” reels through my mind. Everyone remembers Mikey, the young boy whose older siblings place a bowl of cereal in front of him, which he eats because he is too young and inexperienced to realize that his siblings are using him as their guinea pig. Of course, in my version of the commercial, I am the hopelessly inexperienced “Mikey,” with the role of Mikey’s siblings alternating among veteran faculty, savvy senior administrators, and creative students.

**JUNIOR FACULTY IN CHAIR POSITIONS**

In my defense, I am among a new, apparently growing, breed of junior faculty who accept the department chair position prior to earning tenure. Some people hypothesize that this trend is occurring because senior faculty are not interested in taking on the task of department management. Others believe the trend will increase as large numbers of senior faculty retire, leaving departments composed predominantly of younger, more inexperienced junior faculty.

Regardless of the reason, a growing number of department chairs are coming into the position with a limited understanding of academic culture and politics, a larger-than-life workload as junior faculty, and no tenure protection. Senior professors come to the position with a solid scholarship agenda and years of experience with academe. For these individuals, the transition is challenging only as it relates to the new administrative responsibilities. Junior faculty, however, must learn the administrative ropes of the chair position while still climbing the professorial ladder. To help ease their transition, junior faculty need guidance and specific advice about the unique challenge of the academically inexperienced in the chair's role. As is true with any new phenomenon, the best first step is to share experiences in order to gain insight from lessons learned.

When I accepted this position, I was an assistant professor with only three years in rank. To say that I was naïve about the complexities of this job would be a gross understatement. On any given day, I vacillated
between the exhilarating joy of a decision made correctly to an overwhelming desire to grab my purse and run. By midyear I was convinced that my sanity was in jeopardy.

While the jury is still out on that one, I did learn many lessons over the first year that offer hope for a productive second year and renewed mental health. Perhaps all first-year department chairs share my lessons learned, regardless of faculty rank and tenure status. I believe, however, that many of my lessons are uniquely inherent to my unwitting participation in the “Mikey” phenomenon.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

**Lesson one.** My first, and I believe most important, lesson came with the realization that all of my professional relationships immediately changed. Prior to the election, I was a junior faculty member enjoying mentoring relationships with senior colleagues and friendships with junior peers. Overnight, I became a part of administration with resource allocation control over these same mentors and peers. I was no longer just another colleague. It took a full year for me to come to terms with my new professional role with the faculty in my department. During that year, I made some foolish mistakes in working with faculty that could have been avoided if I had not been so naïve concerning the nature of my position.

Another source of concern was my new role as evaluator of faculty performance. During my first year as chair, I lacked the credibility with senior faculty to have much influence in evaluating their work, and my junior faculty friends questioned my objectivity. Even worse, I found myself doubting my own ability to provide quality evaluation of faculty scholarship. Who was I, an assistant professor, to evaluate the performance of others? How was I, with only three years in rank, to effectively evaluate performance when I didn’t fully understand the definition of quality, much less the meaning, of scholarship?

My solution to this dilemma was to put the responsibility for performance evaluation back in the hands of the faculty. I decided early on to view my first faculty evaluation process as a learning experience and to focus my energies on the second-year evaluation. In early fall, I requested that faculty members develop professional goals for the next calendar year. When I received those goals, I met with each faculty member to discuss their goals, as well as the role I would take to help accomplish their objectives. We also discussed the use of their goals in the evaluation process and negotiated the objectives to use in assessing goal accomplishment.
In my second year as chair, we will develop a strategic plan to include a department mission and goals, with each program developing a programmatic action plan to accomplish these goals. With this in place, the faculty and I will work together to ensure that their stated professional goals each year are congruent with program action plans and the department mission. I am hopeful that with this strategy, the annual evaluation process will become more of a collaborative assessment of goal accomplishment and discussion of improvement rather than a top-down dictum of quality from an inexperienced chair.

**Lesson two.** I realized that a critical part of my job as chair was to attend to the needs of the people in my department, a chair's most valuable resource. Many times during the past year, I was so overwhelmed by this task or that report that I would literally cringe with every new visitor or telephone call. Humans were an interruption to the more important paperwork tasks at hand. Not surprisingly, by midyear evaluation, the faculty in my department complained that I was inaccessible. I realized then that I had to find a reasonable balance between meeting the deadlines of the job and working collaboratively with the faculty, staff, and students in my department.

**Lesson three.** While attending to the human resource is a priority for the department chair, that doesn’t mean that the chair should, or even can, jeopardize other responsibilities in order to remain readily accessible to department constituents. It does mean that we must develop reasonable time and traffic management strategies to ensure productivity. Time is the second most valuable resource of a department chair, and time management strategies are needed to protect that resource. Traffic management is needed to simply find a way to slow the revolving door that is attached to our office, so that we have at least a slight prayer of implementing our time management strategies. For a department chair, the two go hand-in-hand.

I found that the only way I could accomplish all of my responsibilities as chair and neophyte scholar was to employ a closed door strategy periodically during the day. After the midyear evaluation, I posted a sign on my door explaining that I would close my door during the day to conduct meetings, work on a deadline, prepare for class, or write a manuscript. On the sign I asked visitors to leave a message on my board or with my secretary. In return for their respect of the closed door, I promised to check my message board frequently and to try to keep my door open during the time of day when faculty and students were more likely to be in the department. This strategy worked well in managing the traffic in and out of my office, providing me with opportunities to manage my time more effectively. Also, because I usually closed my door in the
morning when faculty and students were not in the department, I was more accessible in the afternoon when departmental constituents demanded my attention.

**Lesson four.** One final lesson that I learned was the importance of understanding my core values and educational philosophy. Without that understanding, my management style was rudderless. At the beginning of the year, I was fair game for anyone who had a good persuasive argument about any solution or complex issue facing the department. I lacked consistency in my decision making simply because I had not taken the time to develop a philosophical foundation for management decisions. I now spend time after each decision reflecting on my actions and understanding my missteps along the way. This reflective practice has helped to solidify my values and inform future decision making. I still listen to the persuasive arguments and take all sides into consideration before I make a decision, but now, as a result of my reflective practice, I consciously frame the decision options within the parameters of my value structure to make informed and consistent decisions.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

In extant literature, higher education scholars have emphasized the importance of the department and the department chair in facilitating change on American college campuses. Because of the department chair’s proximity to the implementation of an institution’s mission, many have called for a commitment from chairs to academic leadership as compared with academic management.

From my perspective at the beginning of my second year, I fear that the call for department leadership will never come to fruition until senior administrators give serious attention to the realities of the chair role. Every day department chairs are saddled with the burden of managing the consequences of campus-wide inefficiencies. Who can find the time to engage in academic leadership when so much of our time is spent in managing paperwork and deadlines? This is especially problematic for neophyte scholars-turned-department chairs due to their limited understanding of the infrastructure of their institutions. These department chairs must spend additional hours each day understanding the consequence of the inefficiency and then attempting to excavate a reasonable remedy buried under mounds of bureaucracy.

Neophyte department chairs have a responsibility to this call for leadership as well. All chairs must work to develop a collective voice, communicating to faculty and senior staff that the department chair is an academic leader and not just an information disseminator. However, we must do a better job of demanding
ongoing professional development and leadership training that is specific to our unique position as a tenure-track chair. The old model of department chair management simply does not work for us and, quite frankly, isn’t congruent with the future of the academy. It is time for us to share our stories so that we can build a newer, more appropriate, model of department chair leadership.

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