

Now You're in Charge

chroniclevitae.com/news/1797-now-you-re-in-charge



May 15, 2017

Image: Pascal Maramis, [Creative Commons](#)

After years of taking orders, you finally get to issue them in your first administrative role. You will have the freedom to make your own plans, set your own direction, and surround yourself with people who share your work ethic and point of view. Life is good!

The only problem? None of that is actually true — and it is especially untrue if you are leading an academic department.

It can be exhilarating to be tapped for a leadership role, but while you may consider yourself to be “the boss” now, there will still be a boss above you. That means you will have to satisfy both those above you and those below you on the organizational chart — and that could prove to be a mighty tight squeeze. Theoretically, it’s possible you will have the flexibility to choose who works with you. What’s far more probable: You will face barriers when it comes to picking and choosing people. In fact, you’re quite likely to be stuck with a team you inherited from your predecessor and it will be up to you to make that team work.

I share that news not to depress you, but to prepare you. New leaders are often surprised and disappointed by the realities of administrative life. So if you’re about to move into a leadership role — or considering one in the future — here are 10 things I think you should know.

- **You may not have been the people's choice.** It is quite possible that you were selected against the advice and wishes of the people who now report to you. They may have supported another candidate, or simply wanted anyone but you. For them, the fact that you are in charge now may be a disappointment, and it is likely they will be on a constant prowl for evidence to prove that you are the wrong person for the role. Try not to express exasperation when your qualifications are debated within earshot.
- **The other finalist now reports to you, and he's not happy.** The person who wanted your job even more than you did is reminded on a basis daily that you got the role he wanted. While he may congratulate you in

public, he is likely to be bitter and sarcastic, and may actively undermine you. Watch your back and by no means take him to coffee to explain that you appreciate the situation is difficult — that will just make him feel worse.

- **You may be lonely.** The people you used to count as friends and happy-hour companions now report to you, and they know you are no longer one of them. While there might be occasional lunch gatherings, the sense of camaraderie you previously enjoyed is likely to dissipate. Your information sources will likely dry up and you will need to find a new support network. This will feel sad and hard.
- **Being the boss does not mean you get to be bossy.** It is easy to spot a newbie boss. She is the one who makes unreasonable requests, demands detailed updates, and micromanages every project. More seasoned leaders actually pay attention to the research on employee motivation and know that most of us are inspired by having a strong sense of purpose, a fair amount of autonomy, and the ability to demonstrate our personal strengths on a regular basis. Savvy leaders seek to energize and inspire people, not terrify them.
- **Your people are probably smarter than you are.** Need something done? By all means ask for a finished product, but don't prescribe how every step of the process should look. Others probably have better ideas than you do. Don't get in their way.
- **Claim credit for other people's ideas at your peril.** The minute you take credit for someone else's idea is the minute you will crush any future demonstrations of creative or intellectual expression. Phrases like, "I have a great team," are completely insufficient to demonstrate recognition and appreciation. You must utter people's names and thank them publicly and profusely.
- **Leadership is a series of tough conversations.** Being in charge means you have to be honest and direct. That doesn't mean you have to be ruthless, however. Pick up a book like *Radical Candor* or *Difficult Conversations* to learn how to offer the gift of honest information. And while you're in reading mode, check out *Thanks for the Feedback* for tips on how to accept feedback well yourself. When it comes to tough conversations, don't hesitate or dither because nothing good comes from delaying what needs to be said. If you've got something to say, say it.
- **Don't be afraid to demonstrate vulnerability.** So many of us think that doing so will make us seem weaker, but the courage to admit mistakes and missteps actually makes us stronger. When we show vulnerability, we seem more human and real, and that makes us more relatable. It is far easier to forge an emotional connection with someone who is fallible than with someone who is perfect. If you fumble, own it.
- **Your best people are likely to leave — and that's OK.** Good people leave. That's not an indictment of your leadership, it's just what happens when talented people are ready for something bigger. You can characterize their departures as betrayals and acts of abandonment, or you can pivot and express pride in your ability to "launch" outstanding people. It is helpful to have supportive allies outside of your institution, so don't be bitter when your best people venture off.
- **You will have to work harder than anyone else if you want to be taken seriously.** If you dare to work less than those who report to you, you will be labeled as an entitled slacker. While you are allowed to establish boundaries, if you: (a) take more vacation than others in your group, or (b) come in later or leave earlier than they do — people will talk, and that talk will not be good. If you want work-life balance, make sure everyone else in your organization has it first.

The move from one of the gang to the person in charge can be a bumpy journey, and the isolation that can come from leaving the pack is often surprising and disorienting. Missteps are easy to make and you can be assured everyone will be taking notes when you stumble. Your motives will be questioned, your decisions will be challenged, and your personal integrity will be called into question —over and over again.

If that sounds like something you can handle, you are ready for your new leadership role.

