

Managing Up: A Brief Guide

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No matter where you are in the academic hierarchy (or “lowerarchy,” as one of my students once wrote on an exam), you need to learn how to manage up.

Whether student issues, structural problems with a program, unintended consequences of administrative mandates or a full-blown bureaucratic meltdown, you never want to be asked certain questions by your higher-ups.

“Why didn’t we know about this problem earlier?” This crisis could have been avoided!

“Why didn’t we know about this amazing thing you did before it was over and done with?” Ouch, the sting of missed opportunity!

“Why didn’t you tell me that ...” a) staff member wasn’t doing their job, b) there’s a big misunderstanding that needs to be cleared up, c) I (or my team) did something stupid that needs to be fixed and apologized for, or d) this person, program or organization feels overlooked? Ouch, the dull pain of being blindsided.

Let’s consider how junior faculty, front-line staff and people in adjunct, temporary or other contingent positions can raise their hands and raise their issues to those who have the standing, power, influence or organizational oversight to help solve them. They should:

Identify and frame the issue. Who are the stakeholders? Who could be helped if we changed something? Who could be hurt if we don’t? How important is this issue to the success of the office, program, department, college or school, or to the university as a whole? Figuring out how the problem you are raising interfaces with other people’s scope of influence and goals is the first step to constructing a compelling argument for what you want to see happen. Think about how you would answer questions like: “What do I/does this student/this program need from this administrator?” “How does this need or outcome intersect with their stated goals?” “What are the arguments against doing this?”

The answers to these questions are important in that your director, chair, provost and others are constantly being asked for help and are trying to allocate scarce resources in a strategic way. If you don’t have a strategic plan to refer to, take a look at what the person you’re addressing has recently said in public. Understanding that frame and speaking to the interests of the academic program, the administration or the institution as a whole is compelling. As a bonus, when the administration has missed some important context or has dealt with something in a way that made the situation worse, this approach allows you to frame the issue without making people defensive. If you have advice, counsel or an outcome you would like to see, frame it using these questions.

Take a step back from the issue and remind yourself to assume good intent. Yes, sometimes an assumption of good intent going into an interaction will turn out to be false, but it helps you be heard if neither party assumes that a person is bringing an issue forward with negative intent. If you are on the receiving end of injustice, your listener will walk away with the utmost respect for your professionalism.

Pick your battles. That doesn’t mean that you have to let go of serious injustice. It means that you save your energy and credibility for the issues that are most important to you, often with collateral benefits to your students or colleagues.

When someone is always complaining that the copier has no paper, that facilities haven’t cleaned the bathrooms properly or that nobody listens to the faculty, people just stop listening. You can solve such small logistical problems without going to your chair or dean. Just ask someone, look up the number for facilities or find out whom your faculty council representative is and talk to them.

In most cases, we're playing a long game in higher education. So if you can hold on to your minor issues until there is a major one, you'll be taken very seriously. The corollary to that rule is to please, please tell people when you see something good! Your communications and marketing colleagues die a bit inside every time they miss a great story or the opportunity to congratulate someone on a job well done. If you do your part to pass the information up the chain, across the transom or to whoever serves as the keeper of good news, then you're going to be remembered in the rosy glow of compliments when you bring a concern forward.

Consider whether you are the best spokesperson for a given issue. If someone did something great and is too modest to tell anyone, be their proxy. If you are concerned about your job security, try to find a trustworthy proxy. If you agree with someone but don't have direct experience or something different to add, [amplify](#) their message. Some people are great natural spokespeople, others are not. Your colleague may have subject-matter expertise that makes them the best person to take a concern up the chain to leadership. You may know that one colleague's personality or manner seem to rub people the wrong way, but another is one of those people who can tune in to the right wavelength every time.

It would be a wonderful world if our organizations were perfect, our students were all above average and our colleagues always showed the world their best sides -- but that would be Lake Wobegon. In the absence of a Midwestern utopia, learning to manage up can help make things just a little bit better.