

# They Don't Train Us for This

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By Josh Boldt

[Advice](#)

13 lessons I wish someone had taught me before I became an academic administrator



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

By Fred Schwarzbach July 31, 2016

When I accepted my first management post, 30 years ago, as a department chair, my orientation program consisted of about half a day of meetings with senior administrators on the campus. Mostly we exchanged small talk and pleasantries. I was told that I ought to figure out how to read a budget statement, but that no doubt my administrative assistant could teach me. That was the sum and total of my management training.

Since then I have served in administrative positions at two other large research universities. If my own experience is a guide, it would appear that many institutions assume that academic administrators don't really need any training as managers.

Unfortunately, as most of us in academe can attest from direct observation, more than a few appointees would benefit greatly from even a modicum of management training. Faculty members tend to rise into administration on the strength of their achievements as faculty members: They are good teachers; they are productive scholars; they

are collegial and willing to work for the common good. But the life of a scholar-teacher typically does not include preparation for personnel, budget, or public-relations management, to name only a few essential areas that administrators are responsible for on a daily basis.

What follows, then, is a set of management lessons that I have learned the hard way — that is, by blundering into catastrophes that only good luck prevented from causing great damage. I've had the luxury of learning from those mistakes. So this is a digest of essential management training that I wish I had been given when I started that first administrative job all those years ago.

**Learn how to listen.** Professors are good at talking. We hold the stage, and we dominate it — even those of us who strive to create classrooms in which students participate as much as possible. We have strong opinions about many things, and we begin our administrative posts with an entirely appropriate desire to do things in new and distinctive ways. But what most faculty members and students want from an administrator — more than anything — is an opportunity to speak about what is important to them, and to believe that someone in a position of authority is listening. As boring as that may sound, you will learn a great deal about your own role and your opportunities to effect positive change just by taking the time to listen and respond thoughtfully.

**Learn not to respond too quickly.** A typical day for most academic administrators will involve at least one person seeking an immediate response to a pressing need or problem. Resist the urge to respond on the spot, and instead start asking pertinent questions. Almost every urgent request turns out to be not all that urgent. You risk nothing in closing the conversation by saying, "I need a little time to think about this, and I'll get back to you." Then go gather more information, test its quality, and think through your response. I say this from experience. All too often, my snap decisions have proven the old saw, "Decide in haste, repent at leisure."

**There will always be sleepless nights when the matter with which you are dealing is so important that you cannot stop thinking about it.**

**Don't fixate on who gets the credit.** Many of the most successful academic leaders are charismatic visionaries; they inspire us to work toward dreams we hardly knew we had. But most of us lack that level of charisma and must accept that we are not the center of attention. What's important is the success of your colleagues and students. So plant seeds: Put forward your best ideas informally, and if they are really good, people will get excited enough to turn those ideas into reality. Realize that you can get almost anything done if you don't care who gets the credit. A colleague's success is your success, even if no one fully appreciates the crucial role you played.

**Steal good ideas shamelessly.** Most of my good ideas have come from other administrators. To appreciate a good idea requires that you pay attention to what people are saying, that you think carefully about the challenges, and that you adapt those ideas you borrow to present circumstances. And why not borrow a good idea? Administrative plans are not subject to copyright. At the same time, be modest about your own contributions — give credit where it is due. You'll be seen not only as effective but as generous in sharing the limelight.

**Remember that the people you have to work with are the people you have to work with.** Faculty and staff at most institutions have some form of tenure, whether it be formal or de facto. In the private sector, supervisors have the privilege of firing people who don't perform (or don't perform as the boss would like), but usually that's not the case in higher education. As difficult as it is to work with difficult people, academic managers often have no choice. Still, you will find that many of those difficult people have unappreciated talents or skills. Try to motivate them to do their best, and some will surprise you by doing it. On the other hand, every department has its laggards (and worse, its snakes in the grass) who will never contribute substantially to the common enterprise. You have no option but to isolate them and keep them from doing harm. Learn to live with their constant complaints. Their laments are better to bear than the damage they do if they're given responsibility for important projects.

**Never bring problems to your supervisor — only solutions.** Not long after I first became a department chair, I responded to a valid auditing concern by cutting off faculty members' direct access to the photocopier. As you'd

expect, all hell broke loose. They went over my head to the dean, and I went to him for help in putting out a brushfire that threatened to become a conflagration. He (gently) advised me on how to fix the problem but also urged me to move on quickly. Through his mentoring, I learned that your supervisors don't want to hear about or solve your problems — they'd rather you bring them a solution (or a choice of solutions). What every senior administrator wants is a team that can keep things *off* her or his desk. Over time, you will develop a keen sense of when you are out of your depth and need to kick a problem up to the next level. But that is best done rarely, and only after you've exhausted your own efforts.

**It's the faculty, stupid.** Leaders can go anywhere, but faculty members must be right behind. What administrators can and should provide for them is a broad perspective — essential contextual information about plans and problems affecting the institution as a whole, not just the particular needs of one person, program, or department. Nothing important will ever happen on any campus without the support of the faculty.

**It's the students, stupid.** Over time, we all take on the blinders of our particular job description and begin to think of our role as the most important in the university. A great deal of what we do as academic leaders will be to adjudicate fairly when special-interest groups — the faculty, or this department, or that faction — come into conflict about money or priorities. But it is good to remember what brings us together: our students and their needs and interests. Even at research universities, undergraduate tuition pays most of the bills. In any difficult decision, I try to ask myself: How will this benefit students? It's a touchstone that helps us cut through the clutter of administrivia and reminds us that our shared common goal is their education

**Teach when you can; remain active as a scholar.** Administration is a time-and-a-half job. During the academic year, you'll spend 40 hours a week in the office and half again as much outside it attending early-morning meetings, dinners, and events. You will spend your summers doing the same thing. However busy you are, find some time to teach and write. Once every few years I teach a class, and I try to read as much as possible (and even occasionally write) in my field. It will be difficult to find the time, but your efforts in this regard will bring an immediate incidental benefit — respect from your faculty colleagues. More important, doing faculty work helps you retain your respect for the hard work done every day by professors and students. It's a good way to avoid becoming one of those administrators who has nothing but contempt for those who are the heart and soul of the enterprise.

**When you make a mistake, own up to it.** We are all of us prone to make mistakes from time to time, and most of us in administration can remember a whopper or two. Sometimes we get lucky: In my first administrative role, I assigned the same course to two faculty members, but luckily no students signed up, and it was canceled before anyone was the wiser. But dumb luck rarely comes to the rescue. When you do screw up, try to remember that there is no real shame in admitting an error, and if you fail to admit it, you run the risk of it being discovered by others. Your colleagues may or may not respect your honesty, but they cannot fault it.

**Don't postpone hard decisions.** Time and time again, I have been faced with difficult decisions that affected people I know and respect. Out of a desire not to cause unnecessary pain, I've tried to let people down gently when I've had to deny a promotion or even fire someone. But once I'm convinced that I'm making the right decision, the resulting disappointment is no less or greater for coming sooner rather than later. More to the point, I've never changed my mind about a difficult judgment, however long I waited to deliver it. More than once I've tried to support someone who was struggling in his or her work, only to have that person cause serious damage by remaining too long in the position. My best advice — though I confess I still ignore it from time to time — is to get the pain over with quickly and move on.

**Expect the unexpected.** A good portion of any administrator's time is devoted to what can't be planned, and generally that means human problems. Every time I have ever said to myself, "Now I've seen it all," the phone will ring or someone will walk into my office and prove me wrong. Human nature being what it is — particularly in the average 18-year-old — there is no limit to the difficulties that our students may create for themselves. Our colleagues often are no less foolish or fallible. As administrators, it's up to us to clean up those messes, to assess responsibility, and perhaps to mete out punishment. But it is good to remember that none of us want to be

remembered only for the stupidest thing we've ever done. We need to temper our response to human error accordingly.

**Know when to go.** When I was a kid, I was a fanatical fan of the Yankees, and my hero was Mickey Mantle. One of the most painful memories I have is of Mantle's last season, when his knees were shot and he was an embarrassment to the team and to himself. Moral of the story: When you are no longer effective, you serve no one by hanging on. Some administrators are fortunate in having long careers, but for most of us there will be a point at which we have done virtually all that we can do, at least in our present position. Far better to leave while you still will be missed, rather than later, when your colleagues will wish you were gone but will be too embarrassed (or worse, too frightened) to tell you to your face.

Finally, a word of advice about life, not about administration: Have a hobby. Whether you do or not, you need a center to your life outside the office, so that when you finish for the day, you can leave it behind, at least for a time. (My hobby, not that it matters greatly, is collecting ceramics.) There will always be sleepless nights — with luck, only a few — when the matter with which you are dealing is so important that you cannot stop thinking about it. But to remain objective, and to perform at a peak level, you need some way to turn off the office and recharge the batteries.

Your primary job, in fact, is to stay sane enough to respond to the madness on your desk.

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