

R. KENT CROOKSTON

WORKING WITH
PROBLEM
FACULTY

A **6-STEP**
GUIDE FOR
DEPARTMENT
CHAIRS

More Praise for
Working with Problem Faculty

“There’s a wealth of practical advice in this book for administrators at all levels. I’m going to keep a copy of *Working with Problem Faculty* close at hand because Kent Crookston provides such excellent insight into one of the most difficult challenges we all face today.”

—Jeffrey L. Buller, dean of the Harriet L. Wilkes
Honors College at Florida Atlantic University,
and author, *The Essential Department Chair*,
2nd edition and *Best Practices in
Faculty Evaluation*

“Dr. Crookston is a favorite among presenters at the Academic Chairpersons Conference. His research and thought-provoking case studies focus on positive faculty relationships and provide chairs with six concrete steps that can be applied immediately.”

—Kathryn Harth, program coordinator, Conferences
and Noncredit Programs, Division of Continuing
Education, Kansas State University

WORKING WITH PROBLEM FACULTY



A Six-Step Guide for
Department Chairs

R. KENT CROOKSTON

 **JOSSEY-BASS**
A Wiley Imprint
www.josseybass.com

Copyright © 2012 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved.

Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

One Montgomery Street, Suite 1200, San Francisco, CA 94104-4594—www.josseybass.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, 978-750-8400, fax 978-646-8600, or on the Web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, 201-748-6011, fax 201-748-6008, or online at www.wiley.com/go/permissions.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Neither the publisher nor author shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages. Readers should be aware that Internet Web sites offered as citations and/or sources for further information may have changed or disappeared between the time this was written and when it is read.

Jossey-Bass books and products are available through most bookstores. To contact Jossey-Bass directly call our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 800-956-7739, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3986, or fax 317-572-4002.

Wiley publishes in a variety of print and electronic formats and by print-on-demand. Some material included with standard print versions of this book may not be included in e-books or in print-on-demand. If this book refers to media such as a CD or DVD that is not included in the version you purchased, you may download this material at <http://booksupport.wiley.com>. For more information about Wiley products, visit www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Crookston, Robert Kent, date.

Working with problem faculty : a six-step guide for department chairs / R. Kent Crookston.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-118-24238-4 (hardback); ISBN 978-1-118-28501-5 (ebk);

ISBN 978-1-118-28312-7 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-118-28351-6 (ebk)

1. College personnel management. 2. College department heads—Professional relationships. 3. Problem employees. I. Title.

LB2331.66.W67 2012

378.1'1—dc23

2012016812

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Jossey-Bass Resources for Department Chairs

Books

- Jeffrey L. Buller, *Academic Leadership Day by Day: Small Steps That Lead to Great Success*
- Jeffrey L. Buller, *The Essential Department Chair: A Comprehensive Desk Reference, Second Edition*
- Jeffrey L. Buller, *Best Practices in Faculty Evaluation: A Practical Guide for Academic Leaders*
- Don Chu, *The Department Chair Primer: What Chairs Need to Know and Do to Make a Difference, Second Edition*
- Robert E. Cipriano, *Facilitating a Collegial Department in Higher Education: Strategies for Success*
- R. Kent Crookston, *Working with Problem Faculty: A Six-Step Guide for Department Chairs*
- Christian K. Hansen, *Time Management for Department Chairs*
- Mary Lou Higgerson, *Communication Skills for Department Chairs*
- Mary Lou Higgerson and Teddi A. Joyce, *Effective Leadership Communication: A Guide for Department Chairs and Deans for Managing Difficult Situations and People*
- Deryl Leaming, *Academic Leadership: A Practical Guide to Chairing the Department, Second Edition*
- Deryl Leaming, *Managing People: A Guide for Department Chairs and Deans*
- N. Douglas Lees, *Chairing Academic Departments: Traditional and Emerging Expectations*
- Darla J. Twale and Barbara M. De Luca, *Faculty Incivility: The Rise of the Academic Bully Culture and What to Do About It*
- Jon Wergin, *Departments That Work: Building and Sustaining Cultures of Excellence in Academic Programs*
- Daniel W. Wheeler et al., *The Department Chair's Handbook, Second Edition*
- Daniel W. Wheeler, *Servant Leadership for Higher Education: Principles and Practices*

Journals

- The Department Chair*
- The Life Cycle of a Department Chair: New Directions for Higher Education*, No. 126, Walter H. Gmelch (Editor), John H. Schuh (Editor)

Online Resources

- Visit www.departmentchairs.org for information on online seminars, articles, book excerpts, and other resources tailored especially for department chairs.

Contents

Problem Faculty: The Number One Concern
of America's Academic Chairs 1

Part One The Six Steps

1. Step 1: Clarify Values and Expectations 11
2. Step 2: Follow Policy 27
3. Step 3: Build Trust with Colleagues 37
4. Step 4: Evaluate Yourself and Your Perceptions 53
5. Step 5: Listen 69
6. Step 6: Take Effective Action 87

Part Two Tough Questions

7. What About the Chronic Poor Performer? 113
8. What About the Passive-Aggressive Colleague? 121
9. What About Bullies? 131
10. What About the Problem Characters Who Emerge
During Times of Change? 149

Contents

11. What About the Psychologically Impaired? 163
Carolyn Oxenford and Sally Kuhlenschmidt
Conclusion 191

Appendix A Sample Vision and Mission Statement 193
Appendix B Sample No-Bullying Policy 199
Appendix C Faculty Behaviors That May
Suggest a Mental Health Problem 203

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 211
THE AUTHOR 213
INDEX 215

**WORKING WITH
PROBLEM FACULTY**



Problem Faculty: The Number One Concern of America's Academic Chairs

In a recent survey, almost three thousand American academic chairs identified tasks for which they wanted help or information.¹ Out of twenty tasks, “dealing with problem faculty” was the strong first choice. The other top selections were, in descending order, guiding department change, evaluating faculty and staff, nourishing department climate, and managing conflicts. Notice that each of the top five selections involves people-to-people interactions that are often accompanied by tension or trauma and in which the behavior of one or more individuals may be problematic for someone else.

When chairs talk about problem faculty, what are their specific concerns? What are the most challenging issues? What can a chair do to “fix” things? Drawing on the wisdom of numerous chairs, the academic-leadership literature, and my own experience as a department head and dean, I have developed a perspective and collected a few stories about the nature and extent of problem faculty issues in American higher education and have identified

six steps that I recommend for academic chairs when dealing with colleagues who are problematic for them.

Note that I do not offer six *easy* steps for dealing with the top concern of America's academic chairs. Dealing with problem faculty was selected most often by three thousand chairs for a reason: succeeding with a challenging colleague can be difficult and in some cases impossible. It takes patience and lots of work, and some of that work lies beyond the jurisdiction of the chair. The situation is made all the more frustrating by the fact that the overall academic culture usually bears much more responsibility for one person's deviant conduct than the chair does. This includes the previous chairs and deans, the HR office, the director of faculty relations, and the bulk of the colleagues within the department. Comments from chairs in the national survey reinforce several specific realities that make it daunting for a chair to deal with problem colleagues:

- **Chairs often see themselves as temporary custodians and servants, not as controllers.** "I have always tried to keep in mind," one chair noted, "that my primary role is not to police my colleagues but to serve and that my position as chair is not a lifetime appointment but a momentary one in my career."
- **Campus culture and politics often provide little support for a chair who takes corrective action.** "Faculty want their leaders to do the things they can't or won't do themselves but offer little support when the heavy stuff comes down (lawsuits, inquires, etc.). I've come to view faculty governance and faculty integrity when it comes to these issues as hopeless."
- **The chair who stands up to a challenging colleague can actually be vilified.** "Personnel decisions and dealing with problem faculty are the most nettlesome issues, and I can't

say that I ever dealt with them very well. The faculty usually want something done, but when you do something, they are often nowhere to be seen and blame the whole thing on you.”

Pood describes the predicament well: “What started out as an attempt on the part of the department chair to discuss and correct a behavior on the part of one of his or her faculty members has suddenly become a referendum on the skills and qualifications of the chair!”²

The purpose of this book is not to document the nature and extent of the challenge and frustration, however, but rather to share what survey participants and authorities on chairing have suggested for managing it.

~ “Problem Faculty” Defined ~

There are numerous descriptions of problem faculty in the chair literature. Higginson and Joyce identify “pot stirrers/troublemakers” (who raise issues without suggesting solutions), “prima donna/drama queens” (who command the spotlight and are never wrong), “confrontation junkies” (who create and fuel conflicts), and “passive and indifferent souls” (who resist change and taking any action).³ Bissell cites “complainers,” “procrastinators,” “guerrilla fighters” (they insult others in public), “experts” (they refuse to be wrong), and “icicles” (they freeze up at the sight of conflict).⁴ In addition to these more egregious characters, chairs must often deal with more passive yet still difficult faculty, such as underperformers who are just doing the bare minimum, faculty who make end runs around the chair, senior faculty who have gone into retirement mode while they are still on the full-time payroll, faculty who have great promise but do not rise to

their potential, faculty who are bad teachers, and faculty who make little effort to get along with their colleagues.

Altman's observation is appropriate:

Most academics (and academic administrators) can point to one or more faculty members on their campus whose job performance and/or relationships with others have changed for the worse. In this sense, while a comprehensive definition of troubled faculty may be hard to pin down, most of us assume we know one when we see one.⁵

However we define them, difficult members of the faculty are typically in the minority yet often demand a disproportionate amount of a chair's time. Fischer notes that negative interactions have five times the impact of positive ones, the influence of a "few destructive individuals dwarfs their number, and the damage they do keeps accruing."⁶

If the catalogue of troublesome characters and their impact on departments seems overwhelming, don't despair. The same experts who drew up these character lists have suggested ways to succeed with (or adjust to) such individuals, to encourage them into compliance, and to develop their strengths and minimize their deficiencies. Their solutions and my own form the core of this book.

~ An Important Question Before We Start ~

How should a chair view the challenge of problem faculty? One view might be that a difficult person is an isolated deviant and that things can be made right when corrective measures have reformed the person or when the person has been removed.

A different outlook is that the existence of a problem faculty member is a sign that the entire department needs to mend itself and adopt new expectations and practices. I believe that if a department is experiencing behavior on the part of one or more faculty members that is problematic to others, there's probably some collective adaptive work to be done by most if not all of the people in that department.

Shortly after becoming a dean, I attended a workshop at Harvard on dealing with problem colleagues. We considered an incident that led to the firing of a staff member in the office of a large college. The dean had gathered the staff and asked them to consider where *they* had messed up. He didn't spend any time discussing how the person just fired had messed up, but rather began asking such questions as "Who hired her?" "Who trained her?" "To whom did she report?" and "With whom did she interact?" He then said, "All of us have failed," and pointed out that it would be a mistake to hire a replacement until they discovered how they could get things right. "We haven't made any internal improvement by letting her go," the dean said. "If we rehire without changing the way we do things, we may just end up firing the next one."

In the afternoon session of that workshop, we spent two hours considering the types of things a department might do to deal with a person who's become a problem. I grew frustrated with what seemed indirect if not evasive tactics and asked, "When do you just say enough is enough and take the person out?"

"Never" was the facilitator's response. "Don't even go there." He then explained that if you rely on dismissal as a remedy, you'll solve nothing. By simply removing the problem without attending to and fixing the system that allowed and nurtured it, you will only have created a vacancy for the next problem-in-waiting.

I believe that both the dean and the workshop facilitator were wise in their conclusion that if any department hopes to remediate problem behavior occurring within it, the entire unit, led by the chair, must collectively engage in corrective conduct. Simply throwing a deviant colleague off the bus is not a sustainable solution.

Notes

1. R. K. Crookston. (2010). Results from a national survey: The help chairs want most. *The Department Chair*, 21(1), 13–15.
2. E. A. Pood. (2003). Stripping away negative defenses. In D. R. Leaming (Ed.), *Managing people: A guide for department chairs and deans* (p. 99). Bolton, MA: Anker.
3. M. L. Higgerson & T. A. Joyce. (2007). *Effective leadership communication: A guide for department chairs and deans for managing difficult situations and people*. Bolton, MA: Anker.
4. B. Bissell. (2003). Handling conflict with difficult faculty. In D. R. Leaming (Ed.), *Managing people: A guide for department chairs and deans* (chap. 8). Bolton, MA: Anker.
5. H. B. Altman. (2003). Dealing with troubled faculty. In D. R. Leaming (Ed.), *Managing people: A guide for department chairs and deans* (p. 141). Bolton, MA: Anker.
6. M. Fischer. (2009). Defending collegiality. *Change*, 41(3), 25.

PART ONE



The Six Steps

A major goal of the chair is to create a positive and productive department where creativity is encouraged and interactivity thrives. This often happens best when the challenges and friction that result from diversity in specialties, training, background, and personality are exploited and applied to productive ends. I have identified six steps that can help bring about better relationships and productivity in an academic unit, even with difficult people.

- **Step 1: Clarify values and expectations.** When the members of a department community have taken the time to identify what guides and inspires them, as well as the productivity and etiquette they expect of one another, it is relatively easy for a chair to confront an individual's performance that is deviant.

- **Step 2: Follow policy.** Every campus has policy and procedures for conducting research; hiring and firing; dealing with disability, discrimination, sexual harassment; and other matters. Knowing and following these policies is essential when dealing with problem situations and people.

- **Step 3: Build trust with colleagues.** The chair who has developed a trusting relationship with the right people has little to fear when proceeding to resolve a problem with any individual. And the problem person is in fact one of the "right" people.

- **Step 4: Evaluate yourself and your perceptions.** Seriously considering whether you are partly to blame for the conduct of a colleague who exasperates you and how you might modify your thinking to deal effectively with that person can be very difficult. But examining whether you may be part of the problem is a big first step toward doing something about resolving it.

- **Step 5: Listen.** Listening effectively was the top recommendation for chairing offered by participants in the national survey. Effective listening is not easy, especially when we believe

the other person is a jerk, but it can be one of the most powerful ways to find solutions to problem behavior.

- **Step 6: Take effective action.** Taking effective action could be a component of each of the previous steps, but it is so important that it warrants its own chapter. Effective action consists of being prepared and confronting challenging people with consideration and composure.

Each of these steps is developed separately in the six chapters in Part One. Each chapter begins with and is developed around an authentic decision case or dilemma common to academic chairing that illustrates the guiding principles associated with the step. A summary of step-specific recommendations is provided at the end of each chapter.

CHAPTER ONE



Step 1: Clarify Values and Expectations

Anna

Anna had just been appointed chair. Walter was a senior member of the faculty with an international reputation for scholarship. He had just acted badly in a department meeting, using ridicule and sarcasm to belittle a colleague who was proposing a modification of the curriculum. No one stood up to him. After the meeting, Anna and two of her close colleagues were gathered in Anna's office. They were angry. Their anger was less with Walter than with themselves. Among their comments were "We let him get away with it again," "He's carried on like this for too many years," and "Anna, you're the chair now; you've got to do something."

What would you think if you were Anna? Wouldn't you feel defensive and wonder, "Why me?" Wouldn't you be frustrated that previous chairs had not stood up to Walter? If Anna did decide to act, what should she do? Should she go to Walter's office and confront him? Maybe she should have confronted him in front of everybody. But how could she have done that and not just made matters worse? Actually, she probably already did make matters worse in that she essentially condoned his behavior by saying nothing. Now all of the rest of the faculty, including her two close colleagues, had been let down.

Because Anna's case is real (she was chair of an English Department), we have the benefit of knowing what she did. After a little more venting, the three colleagues realized that what they needed was a departmental behavioral code. Using the whiteboard for brainstorming, they wrote "cordiality," "no threats or insults," "be respectful," "be supportive," and "no swearing." Encouraged, they brainstormed some more individually and then regrouped, only to find that they were hesitant about bringing their work into the open. A solution came as they decided to expand their efforts to include expectations for all aspects of their work, not just civility, and to involve others, including staff and students. They started with other members of the faculty whom they expected would lend a willing hand. When they had a solid draft, Anna showed it to her dean and the faculty relations director to ensure that the code was in harmony with the university's mission and policies; the dean even asked if he could share it with other departments when it was finished. (The faculty on Anna's campus was not unionized, but if it had been, it would have been essential for her to check out union agreements and to involve a union representative in the development of the departmental code.)

~ An Expectations Document ~

“Early in my tenure, I wrote a department expectations document that was unanimously adopted by the faculty. The adoption was successful because I circulated drafts and revisions electronically among the faculty for weeks before there was any discussion in an open meeting. The document has been very valuable to our faculty and to me as I evaluate performance. I believe that it has also given starting faculty very clear guidelines for their first years in the department.”

—*Survey comment*

Nine months after that first meeting in Anna’s office, a “measures of excellence” document was accepted by near-unanimous vote of the department; Walter was one of only two who abstained. The following represents the major points of the document. Behavior was rated on a five-point scale, ranging from superior (5) to unacceptable (1). Level 4 and 5 performance included and built on level 3 (successful) performance.

Teaching

5. **Superior** teaching, as evidenced by continual reconsideration of course learning outcomes, with valid and transparent measures consistent with program and department goals. Student ratings significantly above department averages. Highly active in mentoring students outside the class (undergraduate theses, special projects, etc.).
4. **Strong** teaching, as evidenced by creative and rigorous course design and delivery, attention to course learning outcomes and measures, attention to students outside of