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Managing the academic department's culture: Perspective on human resource management in higher education

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Abstract
Colleges and universities rely on faculty performance to determine their quality. Strong faculty and staff performance leads to better student learning, greater research productivity, and a heightened level of service to various communities. Most faculty members are organized around disciplinary units headed by a department chair who must find ways to help faculty members be successful. A critical approach that chairs rely upon are human resource management and development strategies. The current survey of 150 social science department chairs identified that they do rely on human resource management strategies to improve departmental effectiveness and the capacity of their faculty. They also identified the strategies of Talent Management, Resourcing, and Learning and Development as the most agreed upon effective tools for working with faculty member performance. Findings overall provide a strong recognition that department chairs, as managers primarily reliant on human resource labor, do believe that they can positively impact faculty member work performance. Findings also supported the use of praise and acknowledgement as critical in encouraging faculty member work and accomplishment.

Keywords: Department chair, academic culture, higher education administration, academic labor, academic performance

1. Introduction

Colleges and universities are dependent upon their faculty members to produce a student experience that is transformational. This reliance has been the impetus to call faculty members the "life blood" (Kang, 1999) [15] of an institution, and there has been little debating the central role of the faculty member in the education of college students (Gonzalez, 2017) [11]. For over 100 years, faculty in American colleges and universities have been organized around their academic discipline in thematically identified 'departments' (Vacik, 1997) [24]. Although there has emerged a generation of super-departments that are less disciplinary in nature, the fundamental organization is that faculty with similar expertise are housed in a collective unit, and this unit is overseen by a 'chair,' 'head,' or 'director.' Smith (2007) [20] noted a differentiation between these unit managers, referencing a chair as a short-term leader of the unit who is frequently elected by faculty members, and a head or director an administrative appointment for a longer period of time. Regardless of terminology, the individual in this role carries the responsibility for workplace performance and culture.

The workplace culture of the academic department is critical to the morale of faculty members, and subsequently, their performance as teachers and mentors of students. The academic department is difficult, however, to manage for a variety of reasons (Gmelch & Miskin, 2004) [9]. First and foremost, with academic class scheduling, many faculty members have differentiated work-times, coming into the departmental offices at different times. Some faculty who teach online rarely come into the department, and the lack of regularity of personnel attendance can create difficulty in building community. Second, the academic work environment is predicated on disciplinary expertise, and this narrow interpretation of disciplinary topics can make it difficult to both communicate and build relationships. As specialists, faculty members can narrowly define their expertise, and such content-driven work can make it difficult to collaborate with others who have a similar approach to their work but different content area. Third, academic roles can be different, as some faculty members teach and work with undergraduates while others work with advanced graduate students conducting research, meaning that there can be a vast interpretation of what a faculty member actually does on a regular basis.

And, in addition to these elements, faculty members must often compete for merit raises, accolades, and attention, meaning that the environment can be highly competitive. All of these considerations can create academic units that struggle to find a level of team-based performance or feeling.

An additional consideration for faculty morale is the extent that compensation, feelings of appreciation, and rewards prompt or promote their work. In some instances, faculty unions provide protections and make assurances for certain benefits or cost of living increases, yet in other institutions there is a lack of rewarding faculty for their work. In some of these types of institutions, office space is shared, parking charges are unreasonably high, and there are few benefits to working at the institution. Regardless of who actually has authority over such benefits and workplace elements, the department chair is the individual first in-line to observe, collaborate with, and manage faculty members (Murry, Miller, & Kacirek, 2015) [18]. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the study was to identify best practices and problems associated with managing faculty expectations and behaviors in higher education academic departments.

2. Background of the Study
2.1 Understanding Faculty Work
The diversity of types of higher education institutions makes generalizations about "faculty" members difficult. In community colleges, for example, faculty members are often expected to exclusively teach. In comprehensive universities, faculty members might teach and advise students, and in research-intensive universities, faculty members might teach very little and spend the majority of their time conducting research. In an environment where a faculty member is allocated worktime and rewarded for external grant funding production, for example, there might be little time for work with students (Hardre & Cox, 2009) [12], while at a community college, there might be little to no reward for pursuing grants or externally funded contracts.

What faculty roles do have in common, though, is that the individuals who are hired demonstrate though either their academic training or experience a high level of expertise in their given fields. Even regional accrediting bodies provide stipulations and requirements as to who can be authorized to teach in a college or university. Often, these experiences and education have little to do with how to teach, and institutional services make attempts to train faculty members to be good teachers. Ultimately, though, it is the institutional mission that determines who is hired and what the reward structure is for that individual.

Complicating the issue of what faculty members must do is the question of how such work is measured or evaluated. Some institutions make use of student evaluations of teaching, a system that has been reported to be faulty in its implementation, as popular teachers or easy teachers are frequently found to be rated the most positive (Bunge, 2018) [2]. In other institutions, faculty members are measured by their number of publications, and arguments about the meaning of the publications or their impact has led to a different debate about impact factors and the rates of publication citations (Callaway, 2016) [3]. Proving to be highly controversial for many reasons, including self-citation, the immediacy of a work, the breadth of publication distribution, etc., faculty with a range of responsibilities are subsequently required to parcel out their own time and effort to meet multiple demands.

With such a workload assignment and evaluation system that has clarity in what is implied, but rarely specified, faculty members rely on their departmental administrators to make sense and meaning out of their work. Department chairs consistently rate the evaluation of faculty members as one of the most challenging elements of their jobs (Creswell, Wheeler, Seagren, Egly, & Beyver, 1990) [5].

Department chairs must establish workload and evaluation clarity and effectively convey this to their faculty members. This means that they must rely on key concepts of human resource management and development in operating their departments, a skill set few chairs have had any training on. Overall, the department chair is the single most important role in establishing and maintaining departmental workplace culture (Hecht, Higgerson, Gmelch, & Tucker, 1999) [13].

2.2 The Importance of Workplace Culture
As a human capital driven industry, higher education's ability to improve resources and experiences is directly related to the ability to enhance or modify the human capital at work with students. In broad terms, this means that the quality of the experience and education a department can provide is entirely dependent upon the quality of faculty members who work there. Through effective strategic management, department chairs can enhance the quality of the workplace and produce a better overall experience for students.

Rose (2012) [19] reported a direct relationship between the organizational commitment of faculty and staff and institutional performance, highlighting the need for institutions to pay close attention to how they manage their personnel. An extension of Rose's study found that the department chair was the individual with the greatest ability to impact the behavior of faculty members, especially newer faculty members in determining their workplace expectations (Murry, Miller, & Kacirek, 2015) [18]. The role of the manager is situated with the responsibility for motivating, and keeping motivated, employees (Caswell, 2009) [4].

Gmelch (2015) [8], one of the leading scholars on the department chair position, highlighted the role of the chair in building up, sustaining, and empowering faculty members. This is particularly true, he argued, for those chairs who assume the role for intrinsic reasons, meaning, they assumed the position to assist or help their academic unit. As Czech and Forward (2010) [6] noted, the perspectives and behaviors of the chair position directly impact, and actually create, the culture of the department, meaning, chairs have control over establishing their workplace culture. The impact of this culture, then, influences morale, effort toward teaching and research, faculty retention, and a department's ability to recruit highly talented faculty and students.

With little to no training on how to use their jobs for culture building, or nearly any other aspect of their new roles (Gmelch, Reason, Shuh, & Shelley, 2002) [10], chairs must find ways to effectively communicate with faculty, staff, and students and ultimately be persuasive in this communication. Thomas and Thomas (2015) [22] elaborated on this difficult task by recommending the following: "establish a climate of respect and open communication, develop and follow a procedure for appointments and meeting, find something to like and value in each person,

have or find a sense of humor" (p. 2).

The power of the workplace culture has proven consistently to impact employee performance, and this has been found to be true in the academy (Rose, 2012) [19] as well as in the private sector (Herzberg, 1968) [14]. The culture of the work is impacted by many different variables, ranging from the physical work environment to the tone of interpersonal communications. Historic studies of lighting, music, and breaks during work hours all impact how an employee can view the work environment, and to varying extents, impacts productivity (Taylor, 1967) [21].

In human resource rich environments productivity can be difficult to measure, and indirect measures are often used to make determinations about quality. In an academic setting, variables such as student retention, post-enrollment graduation, and satisfaction with learning are all used to assess the quality of programs. Variables such as these are difficult, at best, link directly to workplace culture, although research has demonstrated that faculty workplace satisfaction does indeed have a direct impact on relationships with students and their learning.

3. Research Methods

To understand and describe how academic departments facilitate their human resources, a three-part research team survey was developed and administered to a sample of 150 social science department chairs. The survey consisted of an opening section asking chairs to rate their perceived agreement about the goals for using a human resource management strategy in their work, the second section asked chairs what strategies they perceived to be the most effective, and the third section specifically asked about human resource management practices that chairs perceived to positively impact departmental culture. The content of the survey was developed based on several human resource development resources and texts, most notably Lussier and Hendon (2018) [16], Dessler (2016) [7], and Martocchio (2018) [17] in addition to Briggs (2015) [1] online work. The content of the survey was derived from their work and conceptualizations of human resource management.

The survey was field tested with a group of six department chairs from comprehensive universities and adjusted and modified for clarity. A pilot test was then administered to a group of 35 comprehensive university chairs, also in the social sciences, and a Cronbach alpha resulted in a reliability coefficient of .6833, which was accepted as appropriate for the descriptive nature of the study.

The instrument was distributed electronically during the summer of 2019 to a sample of 150 social science department chairs at research and land grant universities. These department chairs were selected randomly based on their institution's name being drawn from a comprehensive listing of research and land grant universities. Using a random number generator, individual institutions were first identified, and then various social science academic departments were identified, such as Communications, Education, Geography, History, Linguistics, Sociology, etc. Three different department chairs were identified at each institution, working through a structured sampling process where the traditional 11 social science fields were identified and names and email addresses were identified for inclusion in the sample. Interim or newly appointed department chairs were not used in the study.

4. Findings

Individuals included in the sample received an initial email inviting them to participate in the study, and any out-of-office notices resulted in the replacement of that chair with an alternative from that same institution. Using a three-email follow-up distribution of the survey, a total of 81 usable survey instruments were ultimately received for inclusion in the data analysis (54% return rate).

In the first section of the survey, chairs were asked to identify their goals for using human resource management strategies in their academic departments. Chairs had the strongest agreement with *improving departmental effectiveness* ($\overline{x}$=4.86; SD 3.083; see Table 1) and *developing the inherent capacities of faculty* ($\overline{x}$=4.85; SD .2298). They reported the lowest agreement, however, with the rationale of supporting the *development of specific content knowledge* ($\overline{x}$=3.89; SD .5532). These ratings suggest that department chairs believe that investing in their faculty can result in overall departmental performance results, but that they perceive faculty should have a strong sense of their own disciplinary content knowledge.

In the second section of the survey, chairs were asked to identify their perceptions of the most effective human resource management strategies for use in their departments. Ten of the 11 strategies included on the survey had mean agreement levels above 4.0 on the 5-point Likert-type scale, indicating that they chairs Agreed to Strongly Agreed that the strategies were effective. The strongest levels of agreement were in the areas of *Talent Management* ($\overline{x}$=4.95; SD .2113, see Table 2), *Resourcing* ($\overline{x}$=4.94; SD .5667), and *Learning and Development* ($\overline{x}$=4.88; SD .1955). The third section of the survey included more specific strategies for human resource management in the department, and chairs agreed most strongly with the strategies of *appropriately recognizing faculty success and their challenges* ($\overline{x}$=4.69; SD .2121), *adequate pay* ($\overline{x}$=4.50; SD .5677), and *equitable and fair treatment for all faculty* ($\overline{x}$=4.47; SD .3892).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Department chairs included in the study seemed to have consistent responses with what has been suggested in the higher education literature. Chairs perceived human resource management strategies as tools to improve their department's effectiveness and the capacity of faculty, and that their most effective strategies for accomplishing this goal was investment in talent management and resources. From a practical perspective, this means that chairs think that investing in human resources is important to maximize the talents and skills of their faculty members. Recognizing faculty for their work was also indicated to be critical to positively impacting department culture.

These findings generally recognize that chairs understand the human element of their departments and providing for them is an important chair role. As noted previously, however, many chairs receive little to no training in how to accomplish their tasks, and the implication may very well become one of chairs attempting to invest in their human capital through trial and error. Such experimentation might be very important when considering the variations of departmental structures and institutional cultures, but it might also be a reflection of institutions not taking the time to learn from previous generations or effectively benchmark what has worked in other places. These findings offer a signal to central university administrations that a major part

of their role needs to be investing in departmental leadership so that these chairs can in turn work to positively improve the performance of their faculty members.

There are a wide variety of issues and challenges with chairs implementing human resource management strategies, ranging from cost considerations to span of control, meaning that they simply do not have the authority to make the decision necessary to improve their departmental cultures. Employment elements such as benefits and compensation can be entirely at the discretion of central administration, and chairs might have little to no authority to authorize pay increases, travel funds, professional development opportunities, etc. One significant practice that chairs might undertake, then, is to look at building professional learning communities, mentoring programs, and low-cost professional development that is based on peer learning.

The strongest positive finding of the study is the recognition by chairs that faculty member welfare is critical to the culture of the academic unit. By working to strengthen this culture department chairs can ultimately improve the campus experience for students, resulting ultimately in higher student satisfaction and learning. Such efforts, however, must be driven by the energy and work of the department chair, and these chairs must find the success of others as their true motivation, demonstrating and living the concept of servant leadership.

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