

Survival Skills for Department Chairs

Of the many employment-related factors identified as stressful (Hellriegel, Slocum, & Woodman, 1992), three that create high levels of stress are inherent in the job of chair: role ambiguity, role conflict, and work overload. The first condition, role ambiguity, is predicted by the fact that adequate job descriptions for chairs do not always exist and that, in unionized institutions, when collective bargaining agreements do describe a chair's responsibilities, chairs within the same university may interpret those responsibilities differently. In large state universities, department governance documents are sometimes written with the intention of limiting the power of the chair, setting up an executive or an advisory committee to effect this limitation. However, such documents often leave the relationship between the authority of the chair and the committee unclear. When responsibility and authority are clearly established, written out, and agreed upon by both faculty and administration, stress from role ambiguity is reduced.

The second condition, role conflict, is endemic because chairs must represent faculty to the dean, and administration to the faculty. Role conflict comes with the territory. As was discussed in Chapter One, chairs elected by their colleagues may feel they must answer to faculty; chairs appointed by deans feel they serve at the pleasure of the person to whom they report. Yet, in neither case can a chair risk alienating either dean or department members. When chairs are elected by the department, they still must provide input for personnel decision making. They must also convey to faculty members the necessity of offering courses at unpopular hours and

nt can move forward is often helpful. Reframing the situation this way encourages faculty, who often feel by this time conflict is monumental and that they are incompetent they cannot resolve it.

important gesture the dean can make is to offer to bring a chair who will engage department members in team work. However, faculty must buy in to such a suggestion, or litigation will be accomplished. A one- or two-day team-building meeting for them to set and prioritize goals, look objectively at the current situation, are currently functioning, develop more effective methods for handling issues, and decide who will accept responsibility for it. Two or three of their most important objectives (Lucas, 1992) are: (1) providing for a follow-up meeting with the consultant a few days later; (2) they will give faculty an opportunity to evaluate their progress; (3) they will set new goals. When deans intervene in this manner, they are providing leadership that makes a significant difference in the lives of the faculty who are then free of the maelstrom that is their energy and productivity.

Conclusion

A chair uses the leadership matrix as an instrument for goal setting. The chair sets goals at the beginning of the academic year and for progress reports at the end of the year, leadership and other issues are addressed on a regular basis. Although it is important to meet with each chair individually twice a year in this fashion, the payoff is great. Once the process has been established in the department are addressed by the chair on a regular basis, not just at times when they have gotten so out of control that one wants to take on the job of chair. Use of the leadership matrix ensures that the development of leadership in the department is a high priority.

canceling classes with enrollments that are too small. When chairs are appointed by the dean with minimal faculty input, they cannot be too autocratic or the department will request the dean to review the chair's performance. Finding the appropriate line between fighting for the faculty and persuading faculty to give up certain things for the good of the institution often creates conflict for a chair. There are also the role conflicts of teacher and chair, scholar and chair, family member and chair, and social being and chair. As teachers, almost all chairs have on occasion walked into a classroom unprepared because time they had counted on for class preparation was curtailed by a crisis related to their responsibilities as chair. As scholars, they have often neglected their research because chair responsibilities frequently have a compelling urgency. As family members and social beings, they often feel torn by opposing needs, unable to give the quality time they would wish to family and friends because of chair responsibilities.

The third stressful factor is work overload. A chair's work never seems completed at the end of the day. Meetings require the chair's presence. Faculty or students need to talk with the chair. Reports of one kind or another have to be written. There are forms to be signed, correspondence to be handled, and phone calls to be returned. Role ambiguity, role conflict, and work overload all increase stress.

Stress can be either a positive or negative force in an individual's life. When stress is moderate, it is experienced as positive; life is viewed as a challenge. There is satisfaction in what is accomplished; self-esteem is enhanced. However, when stress is high and prolonged, it usually has negative effects, particularly if individuals have poor coping mechanisms. Stress has been implicated as one factor in all of the major illnesses. It is also a cause of many minor illnesses, such as regular patterns of headaches, digestive problems, and backaches. It can result in feeling drained at the end of the day and waking up tired after a full night's sleep. It can increase the amount of alcohol individuals consume. Moreover, fre-

quent cynical statements about higher education and life in general, as well as irritability with family, friends, and colleagues, are symptomatic of excessive stress. It is also clear that the effect of stress is cumulative. When there are many changes in an individual's life during a short period of time and adequate methods of coping have not been developed, a heavier toll is taken than if single episodes of stress had occurred over a longer time span. Given the dangers to individuals' physical and emotional well-being when excessive stress exists, and the real stress that comes with the territory in chairing a department, how can chairs cope? In reducing stress to an optimal level, there are three systems in which one can intervene: behavioral, somatic, and cognitive. We will look at each in turn.

Behavioral Strategies for Managing Stress

Management of stress begins with establishing priorities in life: If I were living in the best of all possible worlds, what would my life be like? What would I be doing then that I am not doing now? What would be eliminated from my life that is a hassle today? What would I like to have accomplished five years from now? Chairs can ask themselves such questions, formalizing the answers by writing out goals, action steps, and timelines that will provide direction, a way of monitoring progress, and an opportunity to assess outcome.

Chairs' next step is to discover exactly how they are spending their time right now. People often resist this step, saying it is "too much trouble," when actually they are afraid to confront the truth. Chairs should record what they are doing with the hours of their day, half an hour at a time, using their appointment books and information from their secretaries. They should also record how they use the time between scheduled appointments. Chairs should keep track of their time for three days, or a week if they want a complete picture that includes a weekend, then create groupings

that best describe how they are spending their time. Here are some typical groupings:

- Development of leadership ability
 - Practicing leadership skills
 - Reading and discussing leadership concepts
- Faculty development
 - Improving teaching
 - Increasing scholarship
 - Getting faculty to do their fair share
 - Enhancing service
- Role as teacher
 - Preparing for classes
 - Teaching
 - Preparing exams
 - Grading exams and papers
- Role as scholar
 - Doing professional reading
 - Doing one's own scholarship
 - Researching
 - Writing
- Contacts with students
 - Advising
 - Mentoring
 - Handling correspondence (such as letters of recommendation)
- Meetings
 - Chairing departmental meetings
 - Attending department chair meetings conducted by the dean

Chairing or attending committee meetings (divide by purpose)

- Networking
 - Networking with administration
 - Networking with faculty
 - Networking with professional staff
 - Networking with students
- Paperwork
- Socializing (indicate groups or individuals)
- Spending time with family and friends (specify individuals)

These categories are not listed in order of importance because that will vary from chair to chair. The chair's purpose in using them is simply to obtain an accurate picture of how he or she is currently spending limited time.

After completing a record of how their time is spent, chairs should go back and look at their five-year goals and action steps. The question they must now confront is, are they spending their time in ways that will help them to reach their long-term goals? If not, how can they rearrange their lives so that there is greater congruence between their goals and the way their time is spent? Chairs should ask themselves what insights emerge as they look at the way they are using time. If there is a poor match between the direction they want their lives to take and what they are now doing, they need to ask what interventions they can make to reduce the dissonance, and the stress.

For example, a simple but often observed mismatch occurs when chairs find that scholarship must be put on the back burner for a three- or four-year term. The problem becomes how to increase the time spent on research and writing and reduce the time spent on what chairs refer to as administrative trivia. One direct approach chairs can use is to hang a sign on the office door

that says, "Involved in research between 9:00 and 11:30 A.M. Do not disturb unless there is a serious emergency!" Chairs who feel they simply could not do this should remember that they are role models for faculty. If chairs do not take the time to do their own scholarly work, they cannot easily encourage faculty to increase scholarship in the department. Chairs should also think of what will happen to them personally if they do not allocate time to scholarship. When they finish their terms as chair, they will have to begin again as scholars. They will have to catch up on the literature. Even worse, their area of expertise may no longer be meaningful.

Notice that this change requires that chairs make an intervention. They may have to enlist the dean, the department secretary, and faculty members in their cause, advising these others of what they are going to be doing and what constitutes an emergency. They may have to delegate some authority to faculty who can deal with student problems while the chair is working on scholarship. Whatever it takes, if that action increases the time the chair can spend achieving long-term goals, the chair should do it.

Most chairs in workshops ask for practical recommendations on time management. Time management does not mean working harder; it simply means using your time more effectively in ways that you want to use it. Some interventions that chairs have often found useful follow.

Begin the day with a short planning session. Review your commitments for the next day, week, or month and set timelines for task completion.

Make a to-do list, prioritizing items. Do the most important tasks during your high-energy periods. For most chairs, this usually means doing the hardest things first. Handle routine items at the end of the day, when you are tired and less creative. Eliminate unimportant tasks, even if you are good at them.

Break large tasks, such as comprehensive reports, into smaller, manageable parts with individual deadlines. Confronting small pieces of a

project is not as anxiety provoking as undertaking the entire project. Breaking tasks into small sections makes it less likely that chairs will postpone the work. When an individual postpones tackling a task, avoidance is reinforced. If even thinking about doing a large project raises anxiety, stopping thinking about the task will suddenly reduce anxiety. A sharp reduction in anxiety is extremely rewarding, so avoiding, or even avoiding thinking about, the task is reinforced. When a behavior is reinforced, it will occur more frequently. The conclusion for chairs is obvious. Do not procrastinate. Plunge right in and do it!

Handle most pieces of paper only once. Write notes on incoming mail relating to what you will say when you write your response. Skim professional material. Do not use high-energy time to read unimportant notices.

Never do a task that someone else can do. Delegate. Faculty members and a secretary can often handle responsibilities that burden a chair. Ask individuals to whom work is being delegated how they will go about completing the assignment; do not tell them step by step how to handle it. Decide whether their approach is sensible, reinforce good ideas, ask for a progress report, and check outcome. Some time may be required initially to train people, but the long-term gain can be great.

Learn to say no. Chairs cannot do all the things that others would like them to do. Learn to discriminate the essential from the unessential.

Take a lunch break or leave your office to take a walk to renew your energy. People who are overtired are not effective.

Review your to-do list at the end of the day. Evaluate your effectiveness. Give yourself credit for what you have handled well. Ask yourself what you might have done differently with those items that did not go as you had planned.

Add other time management ideas of your own. Use those time management strategies that work best for you.

Goal setting, checking for and removing any dissonance

between what you want to accomplish and how you are currently using your time, and time management are all effective behavioral approaches to stress management. Many of the conflict-reducing tactics discussed in Chapter Nine, such as employing problem-solving approaches instead of blaming and accusing, involving faculty in developing methods for handling conflict, and using third-party facilitation, are also useful behavioral strategies for reducing stress, as is creating the open and supportive communication climate described in Chapter Eight.

Reducing Stress Through Somatic Interventions

The second broad system that needs to be addressed in stress reduction is the somatic, or physiological. The human body suffers when stress is severe and prolonged; daily use of relaxation methods can effectively reduce tension, thus protecting the body from the deleterious consequences of stress. The most widely used somatic approach is the highly effective method of progressive relaxation. This alternate tensing and relaxing of the large muscle groups in the body is a skill that needs to be practiced for optimal relaxation effects. A progressive relaxation session begins with tensing then relaxing the feet and toes; calves; thighs; buttocks; stomach; lower back; chest; upper back; right hand, forearm, and upper arm; left hand, forearm, and upper arm; shoulders; neck; jaws; eyes and nose; forehead; scalp; and finally, all the muscles at once. Individuals who feel pain in the neck and shoulders at the end of a day's work often find that taking stretch breaks—in which they tense and relax the specific muscles of the neck and shoulders and do head rolls—is a useful way of preventing such pain.

Since breathing-related symptoms are often part of the anxiety that occurs when we are stressed, another somatic intervention is deep breathing, taking several slow, deep breaths. Sometimes called the calming response, this approach reduces heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension (Fried, 1993). Another approach to stress

reduction is aerobic exercise. Studies that compare the effectiveness of exercise with that of other relaxation techniques are somewhat limited. Although what research there is suggests that exercise has a smaller effect on stress reduction than other forms of relaxation, there is evidence that it alleviates depression (Lehrer & Woolfolk, 1993). Since individuals often become depressed when they are under a high level of stress, exercise can be useful for coping with stress-related symptoms.

Reducing Stress Through Changing Dysfunctional Thoughts

The third system of intervention for stress reduction is cognitive and deals with what we say to ourselves about circumstances in our lives. Although it is usual to blame situations or other people for our stress, what we say to ourselves about events triggers much of the stress we feel. Therefore, interventions in this system deal with changing the dysfunctional thinking that leads to stress reactions.

Although some generalization of stress reduction methods across the behavioral, somatic, and cognitive systems is possible, it is generally agreed that there are greater specific effects of stress reduction when the methodology is specific to the system addressed (Lehrer & Woolfolk, 1993, p. 510). For instance, if a chair's stress has been induced by negative thoughts, it will not help much if he or she simply tries to relax. Instead, intervention must take place in the cognitive system. For example, say that during one morning, two tenured faculty members in turn refuse your request that they teach an 8:00 A.M. class next semester, a class the dean has requested your department to offer at this early hour; you hear that some equipment was stolen from the lab during the lunch hour when a faculty member was supposed to have locked it but did not; the dean telephones to tell you that there was no representative from your department at the Sunday afternoon open house; a faculty member fails to show up for a 10:00 A.M. class; and two students come to you to

complain. You might react by saying, "This whole department is falling apart." However, although each of these occurrences is distressing, they are not symptoms that the department is falling apart. If they were, you would be justified in feeling greatly stressed. But once you create a label that is both negative and an overgeneralization, you can feel as stressed as if a situation were really true. Such negative thinking is often based on an arbitrary inference. We begin with a logical statement, such as, "I will telephone the person who was supposed to be at the open house yesterday to find out what happened. If there is no good reason for her absence, I will certainly let her know that she let the department down." We then start thinking about the other incidents we have to check out, and if then we tie them together and look at nothing else, even though this relational view is unjustified, our stress level rises sharply.

Dysfunctional thoughts contribute to making us ineffective. Take a fairly simple example from the earlier list of time management skills. I suggested that procrastination often has anxiety as its base and that one way for chairs to manage the anxiety is to break a task into its component parts and then adhere to timelines for completing each part. The dysfunctional thinking that is often found in individuals who procrastinate often goes like this: This is an important project in terms of getting what we need for the department. If I rush, I won't do it right. It will take a long stretch of time to complete it. I really do not have the time to do it. I will tackle it next week when I have finished some of these other things on my desk. But next week comes and goes, and the project has not yet been begun. Constructive self-talk might sound like this: This is an important project, and I want to do it well. I will divide the project into its logical parts. Then I will know which areas require additional information. I can ask my secretary to gather that information, so that I will have it ready when I need it. I will set timelines that allow a sufficient period for the information to be entered on a word processor and for me to review it. I will allocate an hour a day to complete each portion of the report and not let anything

keep me from doing it. I will feel really satisfied when I can give this report to the dean because it will provide the basis for her approving what I need for the department next year.

At the end of each segment of work, it is also helpful to remind yourself of what you have accomplished so far, rather than let anxiety rise because of how much more you have to do. This self-message can make the difference between feeling satisfaction at the end of the hour's work and feeling anxiety because you have not done all the rest of it.

Monitoring our internal dialogue is important because negative or dysfunctional thoughts are often automatic (Beck, 1993). We are not usually aware of their content, unless we check to discover what we were thinking just before we felt anxious or depressed. The task for chairs is to ask themselves, What evidence is there for the negative things I was thinking? What evidence is there against them? The idea is to change negative irrational thoughts to positive realistic ones. In the example just cited, it may be true that individuals who rush will not do the job right. However, it is not true that, if they wait until next week to do a report, they will be less rushed than if they do it gradually over a period of time. It is probable that this argument is just an excuse that allows them to postpone something that creates a certain amount of anxiety. Under a high degree of stress, individuals lose their ability to view their thoughts objectively, subject them to reality testing, and adjust the way they have been thinking so that it conforms to reality (Beck, 1993, p. 341). All of us often use ways of dealing with problems that may not be in our own best long-term interest, so we need to discover methods that will allow us to change that.

A final recommendation for coping effectively with stress returns us to the behavioral system. Chairs often say that they feel alone in the trenches. There is often no one at the college with whom they can talk when they simply want to discuss a problem, feel they cannot cope with a bureaucratic or other system, or feel the job is no longer fun. A strong personal support system, made

Conclusion

Chairs commonly experience stress related to the position of chair. They can simply choose a relaxation technique to alleviate stress. However, discovering and employing appropriate strategies from all three systems—somatic, behavioral, and cognitive—that par-take in stress reactions is the most effective approach chairs can take to thriving, not just surviving, as a department chair.

I suggest that any stress reduction plan for chairs should include the immediate goal of learning to use their time in ways that help them to achieve long-term goals. This plan should involve identifying several five-year goals, monitoring current uses of time, and then delegating tasks and becoming more proficient in other time management skills, in order to spend more time on pursuits that do further long-term goals. A second goal for chairs is to routinely use the stress management strategies that they find work for them. Chairs should select one of the somatic strategies and one of the behavior strategies to use at least once a day, evaluating the extent to which they feel less stressed after using each intervention for several weeks. After experimenting in this way, chairs can retain the strategies that work for them. Also, whenever chairs feel stressed, they should monitor their internal dialogue following this process: ask yourself whether this is a dysfunctional thought and, if it is, change it. Ask yourself what evidence exists for and against the negative inference you have drawn. If your negative thoughts are overgeneralizations, substitute positive rational statements.

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up of high-quality interpersonal relationships, is crucial for chairs who want to overcome this loneliness. Although a high level of trustworthiness is the first requirement for all those in chairs' personal networks, chairs also need several different kinds of people to whom they can turn. A high-caliber support network should include a person who knows the system and can, therefore, listen knowledgeablely and give good advice; a person who builds the chair's self-esteem and helps the chair believe he or she can succeed; a person with whom the chair can celebrate success; a person who is a good listener and supportive, off whom the chair can bounce ideas; and a person who is a critic, helping the chair think analytically about plans and enrich his or her ideas. Chairs who do not have this array of individuals in their support networks at present can make plans to identify people who can fill these needs. Such networking roles are often parts of reciprocal arrangements, and chairs can also consider serving one of these roles for someone else. When they think about it, many chairs find they use only one person, often a member of their families, to satisfy all of these network needs. Besides the fact that this habit places too great a burden on a single individual, it is difficult for one person to fill all the needed roles effectively.

For chairs who want to do some further reading about methods of reducing stress, I recommend several classics, all available in paperback (complete information is included in the references): D. D. Burns, *Feeling Good* (1980); E. M. Catalano, W. Webb, J. Welsh, and C. Morin, *Getting to Sleep* (1990); M. Davis, E. R. Eshelman, and M. McKay, *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* (1988); H. S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1993); M. McKay and P. Fanning, *Prisoners of Belief* (1991) and *Self-Esteem* (1993); M. McKay, P. D. Rogers, and J. McKay, *When Anger Hurts* (1989); M. Seligman, *Learned Optimism* (1992); and G. G. Scott, *Resolving Conflict: With Others and Within Yourself* (1990).