Lessons Learned: Dealing with Issues, Part 1

by Mary Owens, Ph.D.

As chair of a very large and diverse department, I spent quite a bit of time on issues between students and faculty, sometimes between colleagues. As an intake department providing ESL and reading classes, we had many students brand new to college and/or the culture of U.S. higher education. Our size and diversity as a department, as well as the diversity of our students, provided opportunities for miscommunication and for issues to develop. An important aspect of my job as chair was to address these issues when they interfered with the accomplishment of our primary goal as an academic department: educating students.

These are high-stakes situations with potential for immediate negative effects on students such as derailing their learning in that particular class, as well as long-term negative effects such as derailing their degree completion. Those students involved are often upset by the time they bring the matter to the chair. Resolution usually means the chair meeting with the faculty member, which may be unpleasant and even confrontational, also with potential for negative effects, immediate and long-term. Such high stakes warrant taking a deliberate and measured approach.

As chair, my responsibility was to help resolve the issue, whatever it was, in order to advance the goal of educating our students. This was often easier said than done since these were sometimes complex situations. I made more than my share of mistakes in handling such situations, but I also learned a lot.

To help resolve these situations, I found I needed to prepare myself mentally, to gather information on what happened, to determine if the situation was fixable, to facilitate a resolution, and to follow-up.   These are not discreet, consecutive stages, but are important intertwined aspects of the process.

This time, I'd like to focus on **preparing myself mentally,** particularly for high stress meetings. This includes venting, rehearsing, and framing.

I first try to **vent** any exasperation I might have with the individuals involved. I need to clear from my mind any characterizations that could interfere with resolution; for example, "She has a terrible temper." "He's always causing problems." If I get stuck on such notions, where can we go from there to resolve the problem? Rushing to judgment is counter-productive.

I also take the time to **rehearse** what I might say, especially when I am raising a complaint or criticism about someone with that person. I imagine as many hypothetical responses from that person and what I might say in response. I pay close attention to how I might say something to avoid accusatory language from distorting the message; for example, I don't say "Students think you are a bad teacher."

Instead, I would say, "Some of your students are struggling with (specific example)." I ensure I have specific examples of the problematic behavior. Rehearsing helps reduce my stress, which will help me to fulfill my role more effectively.

Most important in preparing myself is what I call *framing*.

I start from the premise that people, in general, try to do their best. More specifically, faculty try to teach as best they can and students try to learn as best they can: all are working to advance the common goal of educating students. In addition, people want to know if something they are doing is interfering with achieving that goal, and they will want to change that behavior.

This framework may seem naïve, as sometimes people are, in fact, intent on doing mischief or, worse, on interfering with the achievement of the common goal. I have had such cases, which become whole other matters. However, in most cases, I have found that faculty and students are trying to do their best.

This framework is very productive in a number of ways. First, it puts a difficult situation (a misunderstanding/issue) in a more positive light, mitigating the negativity and helping to reduce at least my own stress in dealing with the matter.

Second, it provides a framework for constructively discussing the problematic behavior at issue with those involved. It provides the opening for possible explanations of teacher behavior that students have misinterpreted negatively; for example, not reviewing all the homework answers or not answering all student questions are teacher strategies to help students find their own answers. When meeting with faculty, I have couched criticism in terms of this framework. For example, "I know you want to help your students learn, but this (specific behavior) is keeping that from happening."

Finally, this premise provides a useful framework throughout the process of moving to resolution of the issue.

I have found that mental preparation is only one important aspect of dealing with these high stakes situations. The other important aspects – gathering information, facilitating solutions, and following-up – will be addressed in subsequent articles.

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