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Creating a Culture of Respect

Treating staff members as fellow professionals means making sure they are full participants in department life

By [GARY A. OLSON](#)

Back when I was new to the profession, I witnessed a senior professor shouting loudly at a departmental secretary in a busy hallway. The professor, a rather large man, stood face to face as he barked at the petite woman. He was obviously out of control, accusing her of misplacing a page of an original manuscript that she had been typing for him.




While that type of abusive tirade is, fortunately, uncommon in academe — and was just as rare then — many of us may be guilty of failing to treat administrative staff members with the full respect they deserve.

A senior scholar and prominent feminist admitted to me that as a junior faculty member, she had habitually treated office-staff members as if they were her personal assistants. "I would simply hand a test to the secretary and say, 'I'll need this by 3 this afternoon,'" she told me sheepishly. She realizes now that she must have seemed abrupt and condescending: "I didn't mean to be rude or unfriendly; I was just task-oriented."

An office manager in an academic department even told me that the faculty members had voted to exclude (she used the word "ban") staff employees from departmental meetings. Although she had worked in the department "longer than just about every single professor," she was treated as if she were not a full member — and an essential one at that, since she managed the budget and was the only one with a thorough grasp of university policies and procedures.

"I've broken in six chairmen in my time here," she said. "But only one of them ever made me feel that he appreciated all that I've done."

Those incidents illustrate a kind of inequity that continues to exist in academe despite the influence of progressive thinking about issues of socioeconomic class and cultural hierarchies: Some of us treat staff members as the second-class citizens of our departments.



Certainly times have changed, and there is considerably more sensitivity than there was a few decades ago. No longer do we think of sending the office manager out to pick up our dry cleaning. But the residue of that patronizing approach persists in some departments.

We all know faculty members and administrators who regularly chastise or snap at office workers, speak to them in a condescending tone, or treat them as if they were invisible, excluding them from departmental activities and functions. One staff member told me that some faculty members in her department — including the chair — regularly speak to her as if she were a child, even though she is older than most of them.

Why that disrespect persists is hard to determine. It's often said that administrators and faculty members seem to think they are the only ones in the university. Perhaps we get too wrapped up in our own daily work and forget those who are hired to assist us. Perhaps some academics feel that because they have earned a Ph.D., they are inherently superior to the people who work in supporting roles. Regardless, there is no excuse for treating staff members as anything less than our co-workers. And there should be zero tolerance for abusive behavior.

As a dean, I have occasionally introduced my college's office manager and budget officer to visitors by saying, "This is Sandi — she actually runs the college." Sandi would inevitably give a dismissive wave and say, "Oh, don't listen to him," but the fact is that my job would be impossible — or at least impossibly more difficult — without her. It is her vigilance that has prevented a number of potential fiscal calamities. It is her creativity that has helped us perform near miracles with scant resources. And it is her meticulous attention to detail that has helped us steer a very complex college, with a \$34-million budget, through many a minefield.

Sandi is but one of a number of staff professionals who manage much of the important work of the college. There's the person who directs the general-education curriculum and deals with ceaseless complaints from students and their parents. There's the person who aids collegewide committees and supports the activities of curriculum management and program assessment. There are the many technology experts who spend their days racing from problem to problem in an effort to keep a complex infrastructure up and running. And there's the receptionist in the college office who deftly sorts through hundreds of meeting requests and manages the schedules of the dean and associate deans.

My point is that, as a workplace, an academic department is more than the sum of its faculty members. The people who fill staff roles are essential to our common endeavor. And the sad truth is that they are often poorly compensated for the amount of responsibility they have.

Treating staff members as fellow professionals extends beyond simply being civil. It means taking steps to ensure that they are full participants in the life of the department.

My college, for example, recently enacted changes to our bylaws ensuring that each of the two staff groups — civil service and administrative professionals — has representation on the College Council, our shared-governance body. We also enacted procedures that give staff employees a voice in the selection and evaluation of department heads and the creation of strategic plans.

In addition, the college sponsors regular town-hall forums with each of the staff groups. And we established staff-recognition awards that acknowledge (with a substantial monetary prize) outstanding work. Those are but a few of the kinds of measures that can be taken to give staff professionals the voice and respect they deserve as fellow members of our departments and colleges.

I know a professor who became frustrated with the "chilly," impersonal climate of her department office, so she made a habit of talking every day with staff members. She might compliment someone who did good work on a project, or ask how the kids are doing. Those simple gestures had a ripple effect as other faculty members followed suit, gradually transforming the department into a friendlier environment.

Nothing will completely inoculate the academic workplace from bad behavior, whether on the part of faculty members, administrators, or staff members themselves. But instead of complaining about the workplace we have, perhaps we should take more responsibility for creating the workplace we *ought* to have. We all gain when we take the time to foster a culture of professionalism and mutual respect.

A footnote: A week after the professor shouted at the secretary for losing that manuscript page, he found it in his office, stuck to the side of his desk, just out of view. I doubt he apologized.

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