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How to Get What You Want in Academe

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HEADS UPAdvice for
academic
administrators

Professors may be among the most highly educated members of society, but when it comes to negotiating our daily professional relationships, we sometimes seem to check our intelligence at the door. Ostensibly the bastion of reasoned and collegial discourse, academe is often plagued by inexcusably rude and uncollegial behavior.

At a recent professional meeting, a department chairman described being yelled at by a faculty member disgruntled over not being assigned to teach a favorite course.

"I was flabbergasted," the chairman said. "This newly promoted associate professor hollered at me right out in the busy hallway as if I were a misbehaving child." He was especially annoyed because the complainant had chosen to adopt an adversarial tone from the outset. "The scene in the hallway was not the culmination of a long discussion or debate," the chairman said. "He simply acted out from the get-go."

It was a department chairman who did the shouting in another recent incident I know of, yelling at the dean of his graduate school because of the dean's newly imposed restrictions on doctoral-defense committees. The dean reported the incident to the chairman's academic dean, who sighed and responded, "Yes, he often behaves badly, especially when things don't go his way."

On occasion, such outbursts even escalate to the next level. I worked at a university where a fistfight once erupted between two faculty members in a department meeting. While such scuffles are rare, the fact that they happen at all illustrates the depth of passion -- and, at times, ill will -- that can dwell just below the surface of many a department.

An elderly professor emeritus was so disillusioned by the rancor in her former department that she told me she would not seek work as a professor today if she were a newly graduated Ph.D. "I became a professor because I wanted to live the life of the mind," she said, "not the life of a pugilist."

Students, unfortunately, are contributing to our culture of incivility. Professors and administrators report more and more incidents of students acting out in verbally abusive ways. The term "grade dispute" used to refer to a reasoned weighing of facts and evidence; now it seems to suggest a diatribe.

E-mail has exacerbated the situation. Tone is difficult to regulate in e-mail under normal circumstances, but the likelihood of producing an intemperate message rises exponentially once someone feels wronged or believes that some injustice has been perpetrated. I can't count the number of times I've witnessed individuals firing off inappropriate e-mails in a fit of pique -- messages that could only be described as "screaming in print." I suspect that more often than not the authors of those immoderate messages would be shocked at the viciousness of their own prose if they could only step back and read them from the perspective of the recipient.

The culture of incivility is ubiquitous. All one need do is peruse discussion forums for academics and their countless blogs to see how much reasoned, intelligent discourse has eroded and is being replaced by mean-spirited name calling and finger pointing.

What's more, people don't seem to consider the consequences of their bad behavior. I know of a small group of faculty members who waged a vicious attack on their chairwoman over a decision she made affecting their area of study. Two weeks later, the group's ring leader petitioned the chairwoman for her "moral and financial support" of a new project he wanted to start on the campus.

"I thought I'd entered the twilight zone," she told me. "He acted as if the attack of a few weeks earlier had never happened and now we were supposed to become bosom buddies."

One serious consequence of incivility is that you can permanently damage your reputation in an institution after only a few incidents of hotheadedness. A professor I know was interested in trying his hand at administrative work, and even exhibited a fair amount of talent as a potential administrator, but officials in his institution refused to appoint him to such positions because he had developed a reputation as a "crank" after firing off multiple angry e-mail messages to his department colleagues (and copying the president) over the years.

"We will never consider him for a position of responsibility in the university," his dean told me. "He can't be trusted to demonstrate good judgment."

If you really want to accomplish your goals in the academic setting, then honey, not vinegar, is the key. No injustice, however great; no personal affront, however offensive; no decision, however wrongheaded, can justify abusive discourse -- be it in print, in person, or in public.

In my experience, there's always a way to resolve a disagreement in a professional and courteous manner. Here are a few best practices:

- Assume from the start that your audience has good intentions unless proven otherwise. Doing so allows you to operate in a positive atmosphere. Adopting an adversarial approach, or assuming some conspiracy is afoot against you, only causes both sides to dig in their heels.
- Demonstrate a willingness to compromise, or at least to consider alternatives to your position. Even if, at the end of the day, you don't give ground on an issue, showing that you are willing to consider alternatives helps create a more positive and productive atmosphere.
- Avoid a win-at-all-costs logic. Are you willing to suffer the consequences of your winning the dispute at hand? Some battles are not worth losing the war over. The colleague you are opposing today may be the very person whose support you will need in the future. Calling that person an unpleasant name (however good it feels in the moment) may alienate him or her forever.
- Avoid screaming in print. By carefully monitoring your tone, especially when communicating about sensitive topics, you can prevent doing serious damage to your cause. Before you hit "send," step away from the keyboard and give yourself time to think.
- Better yet, deal with sensitive issues face to face or by phone -- not by e-mail. If an issue is genuinely important to you, why jeopardize it by communicating via a medium that is notorious for creating misunderstanding and bad feeling? Direct communication shows respect for the other person at the same time that it emphasizes the importance of your request or position.

Ultimately, those tips are about protecting your reputation. It's much better to be known as diplomatic and

judicious than as hostile and contentious.

I am not suggesting that we refrain from speaking out strongly, defending a position, or opposing a policy when necessary. Adversaries need to be opposed, bullies put in their place, abhorrent policies overturned, new policies championed. That is part of the daily work of academe.

And, yes, malevolent people do exist, as do conspiracies. But assuming the worst of people independent of corroborating evidence is, at best, counterproductive and, at worst, part of the problem.

Maybe you don't believe that academe should serve as a model of civility for the larger society. So consider it an issue of self-interest -- civility and collegiality are key to helping you get your way in academe.

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