

The Chronicle of Higher Education

Chronicle Careers

<http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2007/07/2007071001c/careers.html>

Tuesday, July 10, 2007

Let's Just Do Our Jobs

By GARY A. OLSON

HEADS UPAdvice for
academic
administrators

In a scene in the recent movie *The Departed*, a special-operations officer interviews a young cop to determine if he is suitable to join an elite unit. The officer doggedly attempts to provoke the initiate into losing his cool in order to test whether the neophyte has the necessary maturity and strength of character.

At a crucial point in the interview, the officer growls, "Do you want to be a cop, or do you want to appear to be a cop?" His point is that some people are attracted merely to the power associated with the role of police officer, not to the hard work and risk that go along with doing the job well.

The same can be said of candidates for positions in academic administration: Some are drawn to the potential power and authority -- not to the arduous labor that goes into actually *being* a department head, a dean, or a president.

For purposes of contrast, think of those administrators attracted to the power of the position as "bureaucrats" and those whose first priority is to use power to move an institution forward as true "academic leaders." The former are easy to spot: They just want to be in charge. They have no real vision or desire to advance a department or an institution; they simply want to have people report to them -- they want to be "the boss," "the decider." Consequently, they have little investment in change and are quite comfortable with the status quo.

A faculty member I know summed it up best when she complained about her dean: "In four years as dean, she hasn't done anything to lead us. All she's really interested in is being seen as 'big man on campus.' She likes hobnobbing with visiting dignitaries but not helping us solve our very real problems."

To the extent that bureaucrats are overinvested in the idea of being in charge, they will be uncomfortable with the concept of shared governance and will insist on controlling both the decision-making process and the result. They will avoid opening up decision making to a wide constituency because they will always assume that they know best and that the faculty has a skewed sense of the issues. Their administration is likely to be characterized by Star Chamber secrecy, not openness and transparency.

In contrast, true academic leaders are all about change. They want to lead their departments and colleges to new levels of prominence. They want their programs to be among the best of their kind. They are not content with simply "being" in a position.

Academic leaders understand that it is imperative to involve different groups of people in deliberations over important decisions. Good leaders are not preoccupied with being in charge or being the boss but with leading their program toward a particular goal.

A common trait distinguishing those two administrative types is that genuine leaders tend to surround

themselves with the best talent available. They seek out the most capable specialists as staff members and supervisors. Genuine leaders often will appoint someone with substantially more knowledge and experience than they possess.

Bureaucrats, in contrast, often feel threatened by especially capable colleagues, interpreting the presence of such individuals as somehow diminishing their authority or ability to be in charge. I know a business dean who, in the space of three years, replaced all five of his department chairs. I was stunned when he told me, "I want them all to know who's boss. They owe me, and they know it."

Such an unabashed admission is shocking because it reveals that the dean's highest priority is not his college but a selfish preoccupation with gaining and maintaining his power.

Because bureaucrats are not motivated to effect change, their default position is to block or deny most requests from those below them. Their constant refrain is "No, we can't do that." Or "There's not enough money for us to take on that project." Or (my favorite) "We've never done it that way before."

The effect of that default position is to stifle innovation and progress. It is easier to say no and be done with a situation than to engage in the kind of creative problem solving that might lead to a workable solution.

The default position of true leaders, however, is to keep an open mind to new and innovative ideas. Their refrain is likely to be "Well, let's explore how we might make that happen." They encourage people to be imaginative and to experiment with more effective and efficient ways to do business.

The disadvantage to being an academic leader as opposed to a bureaucrat is that you always run the risk of making your constituents unhappy with the changes you hope to bring about. Change is unsettling to many people because it means disrupting comfortable norms. So, if your primary concern is simply to stay in office, to appear to be a leader rather than to actually be one, then avoid change at all costs; don't rock the boat.

Obviously, those two portraits are caricatures. Complex management styles cannot easily be reduced to a neat opposition. Yet placing those two exaggerated types in relief is instructive because it sheds light on some important principles of academic administration. And even though I relied on exaggeration to make my point, the fact is that administrators fitting those descriptions do indeed exist. We have all known and perhaps worked with both.

The point is that when we take on administrative responsibilities we also face choices as to what kind of manager we will become. Will we choose to be someone who simply wishes to be in charge, who is suspicious of open decision making, who feels threatened by capable colleagues, and whose default position is to block most requests?

Or will we choose to be someone who attempts to effect productive change, who involves all stakeholders in important decision making, who seeks out the best talent available, and who keeps an open mind to new ideas?

The scene I mentioned from *The Departed* reminds me of a line from another movie that underscores my point nicely. In *The American President*, the lead character, played by Michael Douglas, has an epiphany: "I was so busy trying to keep my job that I forgot to do my job." How many academic administrators, I wonder, could say the same thing?

Gary A. Olson is dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Illinois State University and can be contacted at golson@ilstu.edu. To read his previous columns, click [here](#).