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The Delicate Art of Rejection

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HEADS UPAdvice for
academic
administrators

A colleague at a nearby university complained to me recently about her department chairman.

"I'm a full professor and a recognized scholar in my discipline, but my chair constantly blocks me from teaching key courses I ask to teach," she said. "To make matters worse, he can never clearly explain the reason for his decision. He usually stares at his shoes and mumbles." She went on to say that lately the chairman had simply instructed his secretary to call her when there is bad news.

A friend of mine who was a finalist for a deanship in a business school expressed a similar complaint. He had survived a grueling three-day campus visit, where it felt like he met half of the people on the campus and most of the local community's senior leaders. He had spent considerable time with the provost, including at a dinner and two private meetings.

"The provost and I hit it off immediately," he said, "and I felt we would have worked well together."

What distressed him even more than not getting the position was the way he was informed of the news. "I received a one-sentence e-mail from the provost's assistant," he moaned. "Was it too much to expect a telephone call after all the time I'd spent with her?"

A paradox of academic administration is that while a key role of department chairs, deans, and presidents is to support and encourage faculty and staff members, our daily experience often involves denying their requests. Qualified applicants for positions, awards, and grants have to be informed that they were unsuccessful this time around. Worthy programs and proposals have to be rejected for one reason or another. And perfectly reasonable requests have to be denied.

No institution -- whatever the size of its endowment -- has sufficient resources to say yes to every worthy request. Consequently, we find ourselves in the unfortunate position of having to say "no" to our constituents -- a lot.

Most of us maintain a precarious balancing act: supporting as many faculty requests as possible, while gently letting down those whose requests must be denied. No wonder a common derogatory epithet for an administrator is "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" -- too often it can appear that we are professing support on the one hand while withholding it on the other.

No one likes to be rejected, particularly when it concerns a career or pet project. And, in turn, many people feel extremely uncomfortable delivering bad news, especially in person, and so they attempt to avoid unpleasant situations at all costs. When they do finally deliver negative news, their discomfort may cause them to bungle it badly. Feelings are hurt, feathers ruffled, egos bruised.

Because administrators are so often torn between their desire to support people and the fiscal or institutional realities that dictate the denial of many requests, the ability to communicate negative information without alienating the audience has become an essential skill of an effective administrator.

Put simply, "leadership" often means being able to say "no" while continuing to encourage the very person you are rejecting.

I know one university chancellor who has a special talent for conveying negative information effectively. Regardless of the seriousness of the message, he puts his audience at ease, minimizes the listener's discomfort, and cultivates an understanding of why the decision was made. His style of delivery is what makes him so effective: He smiles warmly, looks his audience directly in the eye, and without hesitation or defensiveness demonstrates a genuine understanding of the listener's position and feelings; he then explains the negative news and why it has to be that way.

In short, he is straightforward but supportive. He might begin the session, "Jim, you're not going to like what I have to say. I know you were hoping for increased funding for your center, and I did exhaust all the usual sources, but it just isn't going to happen this year. I'm sure you'll understand that we won't be able to increase funding for ongoing projects until we can cover last year's shortfall, but I promise to make every effort to find you additional funding as soon as I am able." He then would go on at length about the importance of the faculty member's center, that it is indeed a priority, and that there is genuine hope for increased money in the future.

Even if the chancellor could not, in good faith, support a proposal, he would explain -- calmly and clearly -- why the request is not a priority of the university despite its merits. Petitioners might leave such sessions disappointed, but they always feel that they had been treated fairly and with respect.

That administrator's practice contains all the ingredients of the delicate art of rejection: Look directly at the audience (averting your eyes suggests that you feel guilty about something or that you fear conflict), be transparent and clear, demonstrate that your decision was reasoned and not arbitrary, provide a full explanation of the decision and its context, avoid being defensive or authoritarian, and, above all, treat the listener with dignity and respect.

Perhaps people respond so well to being rejected by that chancellor because he is so direct.

What irritated my friend, the candidate for a business-school deanship, was that the very person he had hoped to work for and with whom he had begun a relationship, now refused to engage him on a personal level. Deans can get very busy, but not that busy!

Failing to engage a finalist directly and personally is a form of cowardice; it is taking the easy way out of a potentially awkward situation. It is avoiding momentary discomfort at the expense of a long-term relationship.

If it is impossible to meet in person with the individual you are rejecting, a telephone call is the next best thing. Recruiting is a courtship, and if you've spent substantial time with a number of finalists for a high-level position, you've begun relationships with them. Just as it would be rude to jilt a lover via e-mail, voicemail, or an impersonal letter, it would be an insult not to inform the runners-up personally. It is the academic equivalent of a "Dear John" letter.

I would go even further and suggest that the same principle ought to apply to searches for entry-level faculty members. If you have brought three candidates to the campus, why wouldn't you want to maintain good will by calling the two who were not chosen for the position? Sure, a few long-distance calls will cost money, but that is a small price to pay for the good will you will have created. Besides, one day you may

again be in the position to hire one of them.

Certainly some administrators do not always have the best interests of their petitioners in mind. We all know individuals whose main preoccupation is simply to be in charge and who enact that desire by refusing requests out of hand. Apparently, they derive feelings of power and superiority from saying "no." And some administrators may deny requests for other less-than-legitimate reasons.

But the best academic leaders will strive to support outstanding work, and that means effecting a balance between discovering avenues of support for petitioners and respectfully letting down those who don't make the cut. Above all, it means mastering the delicate art of rejection.

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