

The Accidental Administrator

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By Charles Powers and Ray Maghroori

Much of the management of higher education is in the hands of people who never intended to be administrators.

"Accidental administrators" are the solid citizens of the faculty, the ones who are asked to serve in interim roles in order to fill untimely departures or keep operations functioning during searches that can take a year or more. Those of us who have been around academe for a while have known a few accidental presidents and provosts. And we have known lots of accidental deans, which is not surprising given the large number of deanships and the short tenure of most deans.

If being an administrator is hard, then being an interim one is even harder. Most accidental administrators are appointed from an internal pool of faculty members and department heads. They are experts in their academic fields but usually have no management education and lack broad managerial experience.

They are, nevertheless, called on to perform a full range of functions: managing a huge budget, handling personnel matters for hundreds of well-trained people (who are accustomed to living in their own worlds), coordinating the activities of a complex array of academic and support programs, and guiding long-term planning, among other tasks. They are forced to learn a lot in a short period and to say "no" more often and to more people than ever before.

Yet having good managerial training or experience is rarely high

on the selection criteria. Instead, acting administrators are chosen typically for their general competence, their good relationship with the upper administration, and their reputation as neither abrasive nor dogmatic.

If you are an accidental administrator, you can expect to do a lot of learning by trial and error, and you can expect to make a lot of mistakes. To help you minimize the missteps, we offer 10 survival tips. We think of them as a crash course in Management 101 for college administrators.

You're Not Just a Caretaker

Acting administrators are usually told they will play a caretaker role. Their job is to keep things running smoothly until a permanent replacement is found, not to chart a new course that the new hire may be disinclined to follow. But every institution has a distinctive mission and, all too often, administrators stop reminding people what that mission is. It's easy for an institution to drift.

When accidental administrators are at the helm, people need more (not less) grounding in their institutional history. They need a sense of shared purpose and reassurance about the brightness of the future. Acting administrators should talk about those things every day with some audience.

Socializing Is Part of the Job

There are two different aspects to managing people and organizations: the substantive side (mission, budgeting, personnel, etc.) and the symbolic. The latter can be easily ignored by people who are new to managerial work or see their role as temporary. The symbolic side involves attending social events, organizational picnics, and birthday and holiday parties. It's "management by

walking around" -- getting out of the executive suite and visiting people where they actually do their jobs.

Attending social events and occasionally dropping by people's offices allows you to be seen. It buys some goodwill by signaling that you think other people are important and what they do is important. It facilitates the kind of communication that is essential to effective management.

You Won't Be Remembered by How Much You Save

Many newly appointed administrators are too quick to cut programs and reduce budgets. While certain circumstances may indeed require drastic financial reform, remember that it is what you create that will establish your credentials as a manager, not how much money you save for the organization.

To be an effective administrator, you need to have an educational philosophy. Economic efficiency is not an educational philosophy. People whose only contribution to their organization is increasing economic efficiency are individuals who often lack an educational philosophy. Such people seldom make a lasting contribution to their organization.

Work Out the Details First

Good administrators always ask: "If we make this change, how will it be implemented? Will it work? Will it do everything we want? What problems might it produce? Will the change relieve burdens on people so they can stay focused? Or will it become such a burden that it distracts people from other priorities?"

A good way to answer those questions is to work backward, and think about how the proposed change will affect the people "on the ground" who will actually carry it out. Will the change be simple

and effective for the end users? Once you have satisfied yourself that it will, then work backward and make sure it is also clear, simple, and effective for everyone else.

You want to be sure the change will solve the problems you want it to solve without causing bigger problems, and you want to be confident that the rank and file have the resources and support they will need to make the change successfully.

Make Only Those Commitments You Intend to Keep

You can only con people into doing things for a certain period of time before they decide you have no credibility.

In rare instances and under extraordinary circumstances you can successfully excuse your failure to meet your side of a commitment by saying "things have changed" or "that was yesterday and this is today." But the moment people begin to suspect that your normal mode of operation is to play them in a shell game, they will retreat to their own hamlet. So be selective about commitments and don't make promises right away. "Let me think about this," can save you a lot of anguish later.

Don't Take Sides Too Quickly

Most accidental administrators are hired internally, so it is natural for them to think they "know" the institution and the people. But colleges and universities tend to be patchworks of fiefdoms, each with its own subculture, internal governance style, pedagogical disputes, particular interests, and localized worldview. So, don't take a side until after you have asked what the other sides are.

Don't Underestimate the Seemingly Mundane

Administrators become annoyed when a problem reaches their

desk that they view as trivial or unimportant: Time is precious and should not be spent on small problems that reasonable people could have solved on their own.

Yet, important principles are often embedded at the root of what appear to be a superficial problem. Before deciding, try to understand the principle at stake and then deal with the problem by dealing with the principle. Every managerial decision can set a precedent for how people around you will act in the future, so never hesitate to take the time to deal with problems regardless of how silly they may sound at first.

Appreciate the Vital Role of Staff

Given the pivotal role of professors in higher education, it is often easy to undervalue the role of staff members. Yet you cannot run an effective unit on a college campus without their commitment and expertise. Staff knowledge and contributions can account for the success or failure of many programs. So no matter how temporary your job is, pay attention to your staff members and their contribution to your success or failure.

Share the Credit

Many who succeed in academe are people who enjoy personal recognition and often lack sensitivity about team dynamics. Remember that as a manager you will have to rely on people around you to get things done. So please don't hesitate to give credit to people who contribute to your work and your success. It does not reduce your sense of accomplishment to acknowledge the contributions of others, and doing so will help you to motivate people, and keep them motivated.

Get Used to Criticism

We end on our most important piece of advice: Don't let criticism deter you from doing things that you truly believe are important.

Administrators are constantly called on to make decisions about people, issues, budgets, policies, or even the date of the next staff meeting. Whatever decision you make, some will disagree with it. You may be criticized openly or covertly, or both.

Even when you have no other motives except to do what is good for the organization, some people will attribute wrong motives to your decision.

If this is your first administrative appointment, people may question your experience and wisdom. Get used to that. Don't evaluate the soundness of your decisions or effectiveness of your administration by the reaction of a few people.

In our experience, you will be more effective as an accidental administrator if you learn these lessons early. You can do the most good for your institution by trying, as much as possible, to think of your role as serving the rank and file -- rather than being served -- so that the rank and file can better serve students.

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