Faculty Mentoring and Communication: A Chair’s Perspective

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Q: Why was I asked to speak on this topic?

A: Because I am a department head, and department heads are supposed to know about such things.

Q: Was formal or intentional training in faculty mentoring a requirement for becoming head?

A: No, but since I had gotten tenure, I presumably knew how to guide others.
I would dare say my experience is fairly representative of the majority of department heads and chairs.
The subject of faculty mentoring is closely tied to faculty evaluation as well as promotion and tenure.

Consequently, mentoring carries with it a lot of collateral issues:

- Expectations.
- Fairness.
- Rewards, e.g. raises.
- Institutional culture, especially biases.

Everyone knows a P&T horror story.
Consequently, there is a natural desire to systematize faculty evaluation to come up with some formula that would:

- Eliminate human error.
- Insulate the faculty member from bias or politics.
- Enable both candidates and mentors to reliably predict determine whether a particular set of inputs would result in tenure, the size of their next raise...
A purely scientific, metric formula must overcome several technical and philosophical considerations:

1. How do you quantify quality, impact, etc?

2. How do you accommodate individuality, originality, creativity, passion, commitment?

The bottom line, while many mentors and faculty would welcome a reliable “If… then…” predictive algorithm, this remains something beyond our technology.
So, how can we make mentorship work in an imperfect world?

Mentoring should be approached as a process: as a collaborative partnership that is dynamic and empirical, reflective and self-adjusting.
Mentors are stewards:

They must work both with the candidate for the candidate’s benefit.

They must be flexible. They must look for the path that best matches their junior partner’s talents, desires, and goals rather than simply reprising their own journey.

They must be accessible and supportive.

They must be patient, allowing their protégé to take the lead and find their own way.
A good mentor...

- is knowledgeable
- is a good listener
- recognizes and respects individuality
- is personally secure
- is willing to deliver clear and direct feedback
“Nobody’s right if everybody’s wrong.”
*For What It’s Worth.  Buffalo Springfield.*

- A mentor should offer advice and feedback freely, to be taken or left as the junior faculty member sees fit.

- A mentor must have the courage to speak directly and candidly. Being “kind” or “considerate” can often deprive the candidate of useful perspective.

- A candidate must be receptive to feedback and suppress defensiveness.
TIME IS A NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE.

It is critically important that communication between head or mentor and candidate be regular, open, and timely.
Mentors should work with young faculty to assess risk-reward.

Is the candidate:
  * Betting the farm on a single high-risk research project?
    - Will go / no-go milestones be reached in a reasonable time to take action?
    - Will there be opportunities to make lemonade?
    - Is there some parallel low risk project that can be used to build publication numbers?

* Spreading themselves and their group too thin?

* Doing low impact, me-too work?
Encourage appropriate opportunism:

- Aid candidates in recognizing and seizing important opportunities (e.g., invitation to serve on a grant panel).

- Help them avoid getting sucked into too many activities of marginal value to their career development.
Mentors need to be active, so that they may serve as early warning sentinels if things threaten to get off track.
Mentors should be alert for signs of unproductive misapprehensions.

**Viewing**

**TENURE**

as a destination, not a milepost.

A successful faculty member is passionate. They aspire to be a professional of consequence.
Unrealistic expectations for students and post-docs.

* Have they prematurely retired from the bench?
* Do they expect graduate students to produce JBC-ready data in their first and second years?
* Are they investing enough time and effort in training and monitoring research personnel?
* Do they provide trainees with time to grow and room to make mistakes?
* Do they insure that the pressure they feel regarding grants, tenure, etc., is not displaced onto their students?
Signs of strain in the relationship between candidate and colleagues, especially the department head.
Chairs and mentors need to be especially vigilant to guard against the dispersal of time and effort of female and ethnically diverse faculty.

Current university policies place a disproportionate load of committee work on our more diverse faculty, a load that can hinder realizing their full potential and garnering full recognition as scholars and educators.

Mentors must be alert for the avalanche of requests and chairs must be willing to step in and shield faculty by vetoing requests that will lead to over-commitment.
The head / chair should NOT be assigned as formal mentor.

1. Coercive effect of the head’s role as evaluator.

2. Any perception of favoritism would compromise candidate in eyes of other faculty, especially pre-tenure faculty.
What is the role of the head?

1. *Ad hoc* advisor -- willing to be called upon when needed.

2. Evaluator who reviews the candidate’s goals, priorities, and plans to see if they are appropriate and congruent with institutional expectations.

3. Support. A chair should work to remove unnecessary barriers.

4. Shield against over-commitment, politics…

5. Distributor of resources.
Department chairs need to start off on the right foot.

1. To make job and P&T expectations clear and place them “on the record”.

2. To assign appropriate responsibilities, both in nature and quantity.

3. To assign a competent faculty mentor.

4. To provide constructive feedback that includes regular, written evaluations.

5. To provide the support promised.
Some advice for chairs and other evaluators:

**Resist the urge to appear omniscient.**

1. Admit when you are mistaken, misinformed, or wrong.

2. Explain the reasoning behind your decisions.

3. Admit when you are ignorant or unsure.

4. Invite input from your “junior partner”.

5. Deliver difficult messages in person.
Faculty evaluation needs to be constructive.

- Focused on goals.

-Match expectations to rewards. *If it is not rewarded, it must not genuinely be important.*
REMEMBER that a “typical” faculty member works extremely hard and is prone to amplify criticism.

So, when preparing evaluations, make sure that:

a) At least 50% of the evaluation focuses on accomplishments and other positive themes.

b) Lead with the positive.

c) A faculty member is more likely to recognize and address weaknesses if they are limited in number.
Positive motivation is more potent and enduring.

When addressing areas in need of attention / improvement, where possible think and communicate in terms of moving toward some goal rather than correcting a problem.

What is the potential benefit / reward?
Heads should avoid dealing in absolutes.

Try to offer alternative choices, or the opportunity for a faculty member to develop an alternative. Be open to new ideas.

The right to choose carries with it implicit responsibility.

Commands can damage communications in the long term (resentment, loss of face).

Ultimatums are especially prone to running afoul of the law of unintended consequences.
Over-reliance on the power of the office (much of which is illusory) can irretrievably dissipate that power.
Chairs should be intentional in determining committee assignments for young faculty:

1. Try to match with faculty interests.
2. Try to assign to a committee that plays an active, substantive role. Such committees can educate new faculty about the nuts and bolts of how the unit works.
3. An active, major committee provides a venue for developing and gaining peer recognition for leadership and other skills.
Assemble a handbook for new faculty.

1. P&T requirements
2. Advice
3. Procedures for common activities: purchasing, hiring, repairs.
Establish a strong peer review system for evaluating instruction.

1. Can moderate the impact of student evaluations.
2. Can provide valuable feedback and mentoring to inexperienced instructors.
Discuss the $64 questions:

1. When a chair deals with faculty, should:

   Equal mean Identical?
2. In a world of limited resources, should discretionary dollars be used to reward success or as bridging and seed funds?

Many faculty feel that getting $ entitles them to more.
How each partner answers the $64 questions and whether they are aware of the other’s position are crucial to establishing a functional working relationship.
Both partners are under pressure:

Junior faculty member.
- Grants.
- Publication.
- Evaluation scores.

Department chair. Deans expect them to:
- Motivate faculty to be more productive.
- “Fix” problems, including underperforming faculty.

Recognizing this can help in forging a bond, and in understanding the other’s motivations and perspective.
The best way to deal with crises is prevention.
So communication and relationships are key.
It is therefore in the best interests of all partners to establish patterns of behavior that promote frequent, informal encounters.

1. Recognizing and becoming comfortable with each other as people will provide a foundation for an effective working relationship. Getting used to how each other communicates is best done before a crisis.

2. Spontaneous encounters provide a venue for addressing questions, rumors, etc. before they grow into issues.

3. Meeting people on their own ground empowers them to be more forthright.
When the head or mentor gets out of their office and goes to the faculty member’s territory it signals:

1. Interest (those few steps still constitute effort).
2. Respect (the other person’s time is also valuable).
3. Self-assurance (junior faculty are more likely to speak candidly to a person they feel will react maturely and professionally).

The head, P & T chair, etc. should always deliver difficult news face-to-face on the junior person’s home ground.
For the junior faculty member, occasionally bumping into colleagues in the hallways facilitates relationship building.

The department will be much more enthusiastically support your promotion if they perceive you as being a part of the department, not just in it.

A lot of decisions are made in the hallways.
Don’t be stingy with ENCOURAGEMENT or CREDIT.

Chairs all too often work on the principle that if you don’t hear from me, things are OK.

New faculty are in a high pressure, insecure position in which they hear lots of gloom and doom stories and receive regular criticism.

A little timely encouragement or expression of confidence can be extremely powerful boost to morale.
Be calm in times of crisis.

Chairs need to send the consistent message that they are confident in the faculty member’s ability to succeed in the long term.
The key theme for all persons involved in the career development of faculty is prevention.

Keep little things from developing into big things.

Provide advice and feedback that is timely and informed.

The best way to do this is to keep the lines of communication open and active.
Thank you