

## **Bending the Roles: Flexibility as a Department Chair**

Allen Furr, associate professor and chair, Department of Sociology, University of Louisville. Written specifically for the ACE Department Chair Online Resource Center, 2005.

---

When discussing social roles in my introductory sociology classes, I ask students if they act the same when they are with their friends on a Saturday night as they might have with their parents that same afternoon. They laugh, of course, finding the exercise rather trite. This question, however, starts a longer and more serious discussion of how our behavior is shaped and changed by the roles we play and the demands of our social environment on our performance of those roles.

A department chair is a position that carries with it certain behavioral expectations, which come from a combination of the formal job description and informal expectations based on what previous chairs have done. Chairs are expected to manage the budget, make curricular decisions, conduct personnel reviews, and so forth. If a chair is uncertain as to what to do, it is easy to ask for direction. How to act, however, is another matter.

Just as we exhibit flexibility as we move from one role to another, I think it also is important to demonstrate elasticity within our roles. The reason is simple: If the people we encounter were the same, we could act similarly toward them all. The reality is that people aren't the same; therefore, a behavioral style that is effective with one person may fail with another.

This kind of intra-role flexibility is tricky because it requires knowing a great deal about oneself and those with whom one interacts. One way to improve interpersonal relations and get things accomplished in the department is to assess each person's (including your own) strengths and weaknesses not only in terms of productivity, but also in terms of personality styles and temperament. The ability to match your style to that of someone with whom you are working can improve your relationship and reduce conflict.

Here's an example to illustrate the point. Department chairs occasionally need to tell colleagues what they can or cannot do. Whenever this dynamic is in play, the relationship is governed by the expectations of authority inherent in the roles: The chair has the authority to grant or deny the request, and the person making the request must accept the decision. However, accepting that another person has authority over you is more palatable if that authority is rendered in a style that is understandable and non-threatening to one's own sense of self. Although everyone dislikes being told "no," no two people handle it identically. I find it to the advantage of all concerned to learn my colleagues' basic orientation to authority so that when I must say "no," I can try to deliver the message in a way that will not alienate, distance, or anger that person. (People will "do what they do," but there's no reason to make it worse.)

---

Some colleagues accept the decision, say "oh, well," and move on. Others have an emotional reaction based on their personal histories. These folks have to be given the message differently.

You must keep a constant core of values and ideas, but no rule says you must act on them in only one way. Understanding an individual's personality style and adapting to it when necessary are key ingredients in protecting the ego of the other person and reducing the risk of future conflict. The chance for hurt feelings, tension, frustration, and confusion is greatly reduced.

Knowing the basic temperament of others is a central skill for success in relationships that include authority. Being flexible means working with others in ways that match their personality styles. We act differently with friends than we do with our parents and we even interact differently with each friend or parent. Flexibility comes naturally in those situations. We should cultivate that same flexibility in our professional interactions as a department chair.