

LEADING WELL BY DESIGN: THRIVING AS AN ACADEMIC LEADER

Moving Forward as Chair

University of Vermont, Department Chairs Workshop, 8.26.26

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Thanks for spending the day with me thinking about the chair role as something you can design rather than something you just get through. I put this together so you have something to take home. It connects what we talked about to a few next steps and points you to the reflections in *The New Department Chair* that go further on each topic.

The one idea to carry forward

Notice how often we talk about this job in terms of survival. Notice when you see that happening in your conversations about the position. That language is worth questioning, because the metaphors we use quietly decide what we pay attention to. Survival is reactive. It asks what got through today. Designing your term asks a different question: what am I building, and did today move me any closer to it?

This matters because chairs make something like 80% of the administrative decisions on a campus (Gonaim, 2016), and we carry the work of communicating and enacting strategy (Manning, 2018). When those decisions get made from survival mode, the department pays for it and so do you. You will not redesign the whole job overnight. But you can move a handful of those decisions from reactive to intentional, and that is where this starts.

Moving forward: a few things to try that we discussed

- **Write down your design.** One sentence is enough: by the end of my term, this department will be more _____. Let it help you decide which requests deserve your best energy and which don't. (*Reflections 1, 84, 100*)
- **Figure out where your authority actually comes from.** It's relational, not formal, which is the power paradox we kept circling back to. Pick the three relationships whose buy-in you'll need most this year and put your attention there first. (*Reflections 5, 16, 26*)
- **Build your information filters before the next crisis.** Decide ahead of time who has to know something, who'll feel shut out if they don't, and who's exposed if it leaks. Holding information back isn't the same as lying. It's part of the job. (*Reflections 8, 10, 22*)
- **Don't let the loudest 20% run the department.** A demanding minority can eat most of your time if you let them. It also helps to know whether you're dealing with a faculty member who's merely difficult or an actual bully, because those aren't the same problem. (*Reflections 31, 47, 48*)
- **Change one thing about your culture.** Just one. A norm, a small ritual, something you start recognizing that used to go unnoticed. Culture shifts at the edges, in what gets rewarded and what gets tolerated, not in a mission statement. (*Reflections 68, 69, 89*)

How to use the book

The book is a hundred short reflections, meant to be read a bit at a time. I was honestly less interested in handing you answers than in helping you make sense of what you are already living through. A few ways people use it:

- **One a day.** Read one with your coffee before you open your inbox. They are short on purpose. The point is to set your head for the day, not to study.
- **When you hit something specific.** Grade appeal tomorrow? Search committee, donor meeting, a bullying situation you have been dreading? Read the reflection on it the night before. The table below tells you which ones line up with what we covered today.
- **With another chair.** A lot of the value is just knowing someone else has been stuck in the same spot. Read alongside a colleague and compare where your situations are different.
- **In any order.** You don't read it front to back. If this is a rough week, start with whatever is keeping you up.

From today's workshop to the reflections

We spent the day on managing intentionally inside a role that leaves you pretty exposed. Here is where each of those threads picks back up in the book.

Workshop theme	Reflections to read next
Getting past survival mode	1 New Professional Identity · 2 The Reluctant Chair · 7 A Beginner's Mindset · 84 Chairing toward Opportunity · 100 Lessons Learned and Paths Forward
Vulnerability and the power paradox	5 Leading without Levers · 16 The Power Paradox of a Middle Manager · 26 Advocacy and Influence from the Middle · 33 The Emotional Labor of Being Chair · 34 The Visible Chair
Difficult faculty and academic bullies	6 The Slippery Slope of Accommodation · 29 Inappropriate Faculty Behavior · 31 The Pareto Principle and Demanding Faculty · 47 Academic Bullies · 48 Practical Advice for Handling Bullies
Department culture	11 Meetings as More than Agenda Items · 63 Relationship Building · 68 Departmental Culture · 69 Your Blind Spots · 70 Inclusivity, Diversity & Culture · 89 Gossip, Trust & Leadership
Information management	8 The Art of Information Management · 10 A Chair's Inbox · 22 Informational Asymmetry & Managerial Trust · 76 Crisis Communication · 82 Chairing through Uncertain Times
Boundary spanning and relationships	9 Boundary Spanning (Betwixt and Between) · 4 Changing Relationships with Colleagues · 53–54 Your Relationship with Your Dean · 62 Hallway Diplomacy

Staying in touch

If the day was worth your time, the best thing you can do for me is leave a review of the book on Amazon. It helps more than you'd think, and it's how other chairs find it. And find me on LinkedIn and tell me how much fun you had at the workshop! Everything else, the book, upcoming workshops, and other resources, is at thenewdepartmentchair.com.

And please stay in touch. If something comes up you want to think through, or you just want to tell me how the term is going, reach out anytime.

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