

Look Before You Leap: Transitions from Faculty to Administration

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The leap from a faculty position to one in administration is full of risk. When this transition fails, faculty and their universities lose a great deal of time, training, resources, and opportunity. Few of us can afford such losses.

The 10 issues listed below are often stumbling blocks in such transitions. All 10 pertain to a change in work style that affects management and leadership in dramatic ways. A discussion of these points may help candidates, mentors, and search committees determine the readiness of a faculty member to pursue a position as department head or associate dean.

1. **Working hours**-Administrators usually need to be in the office from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. for meetings, drop-in visitors, and other events that can be scheduled at any time; private work hours generally extend beyond those. Also, administrators routinely have public events to attend on evenings and weekends. If family or other demands prohibit such a schedule, then administration might be ruled out until circumstances change.
2. **Public accountability**-This is one of the more difficult transitions. People need to know where you are and how to reach you every working hour of the day. There are no secrets in terms of your calendar, nor is there much personal control!
3. **Frequency of surprises**-There are constant interruptions and changes in plans. It makes for an unpredictable work schedule. Flexibility is key, both intellectually and emotionally. Can you tolerate it?
4. **Pressure points**-An administrator has to be tolerant of pressure coming from many directions at once. Semester schedules and grant deadlines are still considerations, but add to these alumni weekends, visits with major donors, promotion and tenure decisions, football games, board

issues, personnel problems, space arguments, parking, and more. Financial pressures overlay everything, and personnel issues never seem to go away. Is that OK with you?

5. **Multitasking**-Administrators need to be able to "turn on a dime" in terms of priorities, shifting workload, and meeting unexpected deadlines. There is never the luxury of working on only one project at a time. A good administrator can shift full concentration from one thing to another instantly, but still keep everything moving forward at once. It is like fighting a war on many fronts. Are you prepared for this?
6. **Working with staff**-Most faculty have little experience working with staff as most are, by definition, self-reliant. Administration demands a certain yielding of control, relying on others to get things done. A person who prefers to do it herself might rethink administration as a career option. Administrators also need to work as a team with staff, respecting and leveraging their skills to maximize efficiency and effectiveness while maintaining good interpersonal relations. Do you have this skill?
7. **Reporting lines**-Most faculty are unfamiliar with "being a boss." Having to conduct lengthy, written annual reviews of staff takes some getting used to. Hiring and firing are also part of the job. Learning, respecting, and knowing how to use chains of command is essential too, along with organizational policies and law (on worker's compensation, pregnancy issues, retirement, etc.).
8. **Voice changes**-The administrator is no longer heard as a faculty member (first big lesson), but rather as the voice of the organization. Even a raw, brainstorming idea may be taken as new policy if not properly packaged (second big lesson). The personal voice is often lost. What is not said becomes as important as what is said.
9. **Information management**-One of the biggest challenges for any administrator is the shift in the depth, breadth, and amount of information that must be processed. The e-mail load will instantly triple, but getting the information you want may be more difficult. Information

organization (and retrieval) skills are critical. Decisions almost always are made on partial information. Knowing what to act on and when is key.

10. **Strategic and Pragmatic Thinking**-Administrators have to "get it done." Vision is important, but no more so than planning, execution, and follow-through. A good administrator will be comfortable moving back and forth between the abstract and the concrete and passionate about doing both.

Some of these skills will improve with experience, but most of these transitions require a certain mindset to make them work. Determining if that mindset is present before embarking in a department head or dean's job will be to everyone's benefit.