

# **HOW PERCEPTION DOES NOT EQUAL REALITY IN MANAGEMENT OF AN ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT: A CASE STUDY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The relationship between reality and perception gets tested regularly in the management of any large organization. In the case of an academic department, faculty perceptions often run counter to the realities of daily administration. This case study examines how the structural characteristics of horizontal communication between colleagues and vertical communication between superiors and subordinates influences, and potentially exacerbates the conflict of perceptions between faculty and administrators in a state-sponsored, research university. Issues addressed in this paper include: 1) To what degree does a department chair have latitude in setting or enforcing policy, 2) To what degree do differences in interpretation of policy between faculty and administrators influence departmental management, and 3) How does a department chair serve as both a colleague and a supervisor to other faculty. The analysis of data for the study is based on Barry and Crant's (2000) Attribution/Expectancy Approach.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Academic departments are the seat of knowledge credentialing. Although students receive degrees from universities, the major curricula for those degrees are housed within departments. Knowledge for those degrees may be assessed through testing and measurement, or through evaluation of skills performance. However, it is faculty who transmit the knowledge through their efforts. In this sense, academic departments are organizations whose primary purpose is to transmit knowledge.

Academic departments are comprised of people. People have internal goals and motivations which may not always align with the goals of the department. While this may be true of many organizations, academic departments are unique in that individual members are trained formally to be autonomous actors in knowledge production and transmittal. Put another way, academic departments are full of smart people with their own ideas about how to accomplish goals. In such an organization, individual goals may sometimes conflict with organizational goals. More to the point, perceptions about how to accomplish both individual and organizational goals may differ with each individual organizational member. Conflict occurs when goals among individuals do not match.

Perceptions derive from individual experiences. Individuals process information from their experiences to arrive at or construct meaning. Faculty members, as individuals, may arrive at meaning based on their own experiences, which may differ quite significantly from others in the

department. These differences in perception may lead to conflict between individuals within an organization. Therefore, one goal of a department may be to reduce differences in perceptions.

This study examines how the perceptions of individual faculty members within an academic department may or may not match the requirements of the organization to reach its goals. As faculty may not be truly autonomous actors when working within an academic department, academic departments themselves are housed within larger and larger organizations, with each higher level having its own goals separate and unique from those of the individual actor.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Freedom and Responsibility**

A draw for many to the life of an academic is a perception of the freedom to pursue the answers to questions that are personally intriguing. Another draw is the perception of freedom to transmit those answers to a willing audience. What draws the individual to this life is what Robert Pirsig (1974) might call the train of knowledge which is always going somewhere.

This perception of freedom to pursue knowledge both drives the autonomy of faculty, and is the justification of the autonomy of faculty. McCroskey (1990) stated that academic freedom allows a teacher to speak the truth as he or she sees fit without fear of losing his or her job. However, knowledge is not pursued for its own sake. The purpose of an academic institution is to transmit that knowledge. Thus, faculty work within the confines of an organization. Indeed, according to Cahn (1994), participation in an academic community requires responsibility to others. These academic relationships present serious moral questions about responsibilities to all community members (Phillips & Merriam, 1990). Andersen (1990) believes that professional educators should be held to standards of conduct and “can be held to those standards by the courts as well as students, parents, teachers and administrators” (p. 462).

Bok (2013) argued that guaranteeing faculty the freedom to speak and write as they choose is an important ingredient in the success of an academic institution. However, faculty concerns regarding the prospects of tenure may serve to restrict academic freedom. This may also hold true for non-tenure track contractual employees. Therefore, any structure for protecting such freedoms should be applied to all members of the community.

### **Participation**

As members of an academic community, faculty are caught in a dialectic tension between following their own purposes and helping the department meet the needs of the community as a whole. In many departments, decisions are arrived at through consensus, though this common approach may not be, by all means, universal. Indeed, some policies may be imposed from larger

units such as the college, the university, the university system, the state, or the federal government. Regardless, many decisions are made at the local level, and community members may even have a sense that most decisions are made at the local level.

Cheney (1999) argued that participation and solidarity are value-laden terms that refer to how community members arrive at these collective decisions. However, Cheney argued that these values are subject to change over time. Organizations which do not take into account the collective wishes of the newest members of the organization are bound to become irrelevant to those members. Regardless, successful departments involve not only strong leadership but continuous faculty engagement (Katzman & Paushter, 2016).

Continued relevancy may be related to perceptions of rationality. According to Nicotera and Cushman (1992), an organization, such as an academic institution, should be held accountable as rational agents. Any policies which do not appear to be rational to community members may be perceived as unimportant to follow. In this sense, management of an academic department with “irrational” rules may become impossible, as members will not “see” solidarity and may choose not to participate. According to Baxter (1993), although a culture of collegiality is important in academic settings, policies are important to combat potential differential treatment based on status differences between members.

## **Rules and Differential Treatment**

Rules in an academic community, therefore, may be designed to protect competing goals of faculty autonomy and freedom, on the one hand, and the purpose of the department to educate its students on the other. To accomplish this, academic departments may have constructed policies and procedures for holding faculty accountable. One such type of policy includes the faculty review policy.

In some circumstances, academic departments might not have leeway in determining faculty review policy, as such policy might be dictated by higher levels of administration. In other circumstances, academic departments might have considerable latitude in determining what counts for appropriate faculty activity. In still other cases, policies might not be set, and faculty accountability is handled by the immediate supervisor, the department chair. Such circumstances may be rare in an age of accountability in higher education. However, such lack of attentiveness to policy-making in an academic department may lead to charges of differential treatment, whether justified or not.

A lack of set policy might lead also to perceptions of differential treatment. Sias (1996) argued that conversations about differential treatment within a department create and reinforce perceptions of differential treatment. Miles, Shepherd, Rose, and Dibben (2015) demonstrated that faculty concerns which impact collegiality include budgets, faculty workload and performance evaluations. With policy in place, the potential for perceptions regarding differential treatment might be reduced, although not necessarily eliminated.

Regardless, some departments may have individuals who perceive that even with policies in place, policies are either designed to favor some members over others, or are overly restrictive and therefore do not apply. Such members may or may not voice their opinions about policies (or enforcement of) they deem inappropriate. Members who do voice their opinions may do so in ways that are constructive or destructive to the department. According to Phillips, Gouran, Kuehn, and Wood (1994), faculty with destructive intent are not to be trusted in telling the truth about what occurs within the department. However, LeBlanc (1996) argued that such attitudes about departmental members actively discourages communication about policies that may have been violated or may be inappropriate. In fact, Miles et al. (2015) found that perceptions of collegiality are based on assessments that others provide both social and professional support, are trustworthy, and do not place personal agendas ahead of the needs of others or the department as a whole.

LeBlanc (1996) argued that differential application of rules leads to unfair treatment of community members within an academic department. An example of rules differentially applied occurs when a manager provides access to information to some members of a department while denying access to the same information to other members of a department at the same level of status. Another example might be when some members are held to a standard that other members at the same level of status do not have to meet.

### **Role of the Manager**

In many, if not most academic departments, the department chair is a faculty member who was elected or appointed to the role of chair from within his or her own department. Thus, the new department chair must transition from one role to another. For example, a faculty member may be annually reviewed by a department chair. Now that the faculty member has been appointed to the role of chair, the chair must review “former” peers.

Chu (2006) described the transition from faculty member to department chair as one of which most faculty members are not prepared. Indeed, as Gonaim (2016) pointed out, the role of the department chair can be both complex and ambiguous, with little to no formalized leadership preparation. The role changes from one of autonomy to one of accountability to multiple individuals, including the faculty being supervised as well as upper administration. Accountability requires effective communication between levels in the organization. LeBlanc (2002) found that lack of effective communication between a manager and individuals in a position to make decisions about the goals of the organization were due to both structural and identity issues.

To be sure, the management of an academic department comes with challenges as many of the actors are highly educated with expectations of autonomy in decision-making. According to Willett (2015), the major goals of a chair include advancing the educational and research missions of the department. However, the decisions needed to achieve these goals cannot be accomplished without participation of faculty. These challenges in decision-making can lead to relational strain between the department chair and a few faculty within the department. In order to investigate this relationship, the following research question is proposed:

RQ<sub>1</sub> What mechanisms might explain the difficulties encountered in the relationships between a department chair and faculty within the department?

## **METHOD**

To accomplish the analysis of academic department management, a multi-method approach was utilized for obtaining data regarding the organization and its internal communication. Similar to the methods utilized by Barge (2014), narrative descriptions of events which transpired within the course of the department the past six years were “supplemented with reports, letters and emails” (p. 58). First, textual information from participants, including the department chair and several faculty members were utilized. The author gained access to documents including departmental policies and procedures, as well as histories of changes to such policies and procedures and relevant memos. Finally, the author conducted both formal and informal interviews with organizational members over the course of several years. The objective of this data analysis was to describe the connection or disconnection between organizational members’ perceptions of rules and the goals of an academic department.

### **Case Description**

The organization under investigation is an academic department housed in a liberal arts college at a large public research university. The primary purpose of an academic department is to teach students within the confines of a scholarly discipline and tradition. At a research university, some faculty engage in inquiry to build new knowledge, which is then transmitted through learning to a new group of students. All community members are also expected to participate in service activities forwarding the goals of the department, college, university and/or discipline as a whole. The activities of teaching, research, and service are evaluated by members of the academic community. In the department under investigation, those activities are formally reviewed each year by a committee of faculty peers. The committee sends a report of recommendations to the department chair for each faculty member under review. The chair has authority to accept the recommendations or make changes based on his or her own independent review. However, if the chair’s formal review does not match the recommendations forwarded by the committee of faculty peers, the chair is required to send a memo to the committee detailing the differences along with justifications for those differences. The formal review of the faculty member is signed by the department chair to become part of the faculty member’s permanent personnel record.

Annual faculty evaluation policy has been in place in the department for as long as the chair has been a member of the department, over 16 years. The department policy was derived from previously existing college and university policies, but had been annually reviewed and revised as the university moved toward greater research expectations of tenured and tenure-track faculty. In the period of the chair’s tenure, annual evaluation of nontenure-track faculty became increasingly required through changes in university policy related to job descriptions, workload and faculty participation and governance. Consequently, the department revised annual merit policy to include

review of nontenure-track faculty, as well as make changes to departmental bylaws allowing representation of nontenure-track faculty on faculty review committees.

Under University policy, only the department chair's formal review of the faculty member is entered into the faculty member's personnel file. Committee deliberations and report are to be held confidential. If a faculty member disagrees with the findings of the formal review, the faculty member may grieve only the department chair's report, and not the deliberations or recommendations of the faculty review committee. In the department under investigation, such a grievance has been filed twice for two separate annual reviews by the same faculty member.

One purpose of the annual review of faculty is to meet state accountability requirements. A secondary purpose is to provide justification for merit raises, also regulated by state law. Under state law, merit raises are only allowed for faculty who have been evaluated and met certain qualifications. Additionally, merit raises are allowed when approved by the legislature in the bi-annual budgeting process, and when the institution has the resources within its budget to do so. State dollars are not provided for the purpose of merit raises, under state law.

When provided for by the conditions specified under state law described above and the institution has the resources to do so, the university provost calculates a percentage of the overall faculty salary budget left over from lapsed salaries due to retirements or resignations to be set aside for merit raises. This percentage of the salary budget is communicated to the college deans to be distributed to faculty, by department, using formulae provided by the dean. The calculations are performed by the department chairs, then communicated back to the dean, along with justifications for the calculations. The calculations take into consideration each faculty member's current salary and the annual evaluation score determined by annual review.

In the department under investigation, the method by which the merit raises are calculated was inherited by the current chair. The first faculty grievance was filed in reference to the annual evaluation score as it impacted the merit raise calculation. The formal grievance process took approximately six months to complete, involved a university-wide faculty grievance panel, with the findings of the panel forwarded to the dean for final adjudication. The findings of the grievance found no fault in the chair's annual review and subsequent merit calculation of the faculty grievant.

Subsequent to the first annual review of faculty and the faculty grievance described above, the dean, in consultation with all of the department chairs within the college, modified the methods by which merit raises are calculated. The purpose of the modification was to calculate more equitably the distribution of the fixed pool of funds for merit as the calculation required consideration of the faculty member's current salary along with the annual evaluation score. In any given department within the college, faculty salary diverged by status and years of service, so that any calculation based solely on salary and annual evaluation score would exacerbate any differences in salaries by faculty members.

Given the nature of the changes, and following the first faculty grievance, the department chair set about writing a detailed description of the process of faculty merit raise calculation based on faculty review, along with details of the formulas used for calculation and the required reporting process for merit raise recommendations to the dean and audited by the provost's office. A copy

of the document, along with sample calculation sheets, was made available to all faculty in the department and forwarded to the dean. Upon review, the dean recommended that the department chair forward a copy of the document to other department chairs within the college and to the provost. No such document had existed in the department before being created by the current chair. However, since its creation, multiple requests for explanation of the complex calculations have come from a few faculty within the department, first by the original grievant, then by two other faculty members in subsequent years.

Department chairs serve at the appointment of the dean and report directly to the dean, as per university and university system policy. Appointments are for 3 year terms, renewable, upon formal review. Initial and subsequent appointments involve department faculty input where the dean requests confidential commentary from faculty, in response to a request from the dean along with the chair's written self-evaluation. College and departmental bylaws allow for votes to remove a department chair with justification. Upon renewal, the dean meets with the department chair to review comments from faculty. The chief complaint from a few faculty members (number of, or names of faculty not provided to the chair), was a lack of transparency in annual review and merit calculation processes.

Subsequent to renewal, the department chair was named in a second grievance by the same faculty member who filed the first grievance. The chief complaint was discrimination in annual review and merit raise calculation. The department chair was required to respond to complaints and provide justification for actions to the university's Equal Opportunity Services office, under the university's legal affairs office. The second grievance took approximately six months to complete with the findings of the panel forwarded to the dean for final adjudication. The findings found no fault in the chair's treatment of the faculty grievant. Consequent to the second grievance, the university administration acknowledged that although the faculty have a right to grieve the actions of a supervisor, supervisors have limited protections against unhappy faculty members who wish to file unjustified grievances.

In the current case, the author contends that the department chair has a different perception on issues related to faculty review and merit raise calculation than at least a few members of the faculty, and in particular the faculty member who has filed grievances. First, some faculty members seem to believe that the department chair has latitude in both setting and enforcing review and merit policy. In the case of both annual evaluation policy and merit calculation policy, both policies were created by individuals other than the department chair. Annual evaluation policy is specified by state law, university system policy, university policy, and college and departmental bylaws. Annual evaluation policy was in place before the current chair was appointed to a first term. The departmental annual evaluation policy is revised by faculty committee, on which the faculty who have questioned the chair's role in setting policy have served. During the first term, the chair edited the annual evaluation policy to include footnotes to relevant regulations and rules outside the department, on which the departmental policy was based. Relatedly, and as noted above, the current chair inherited the merit calculation policy which was revised by college committee during the chair's first term. Thus, the chair has little latitude in setting policy.

Second, the department chair is responsible, by university system rules, to communicate concerns of the faculty to administration and communicate administration policy to faculty at the behest of

the college dean. Faculty are hired by the dean. Thus, the dean relies on department chairs to manage departments which may include reporting to the dean any issues the chair has with faculty not following policy. Differences in interpretation of policy between faculty members and administration, including department chairs, have resulted in conflict within the department, and in particular between the department chair and faculty who file complaints related to faculty review with the university. Multiple complaints have resulted in relational strain between the chair and one faculty member in particular. The relational strain has led to the need for mediation between the department chair and a faculty member through the university ombudsperson.

Third, although the chair currently serves as the supervisor of faculty within the department, the chair was appointed from among members of the faculty within the department, as allowed for under university system, university, college and departmental rules. According to these rules, faculty appointments to chair are made by the dean through recommendations initially forwarded to the dean by an elected faculty committee. In the department under investigation, the current chair served as a faculty member within the department for nine years prior to his appointment to department chair. Prior to becoming chair, as a faculty member, the author served on many of the departmental committees charged with setting departmental policy. Faculty vote on departmental policy changes as well as committee appointments on an annual basis. Under current bylaws, the department chair is only allowed to participate in faculty votes in the case of a tie.

## **ANALYSIS**

The current case describes issues which can contribute to relational strain between a department chair and faculty. This relational strain is exacerbated primarily by the department chair's role as a supervisor over "previously" defined colleagues, his or her role as the official "interpreter" of policy, and his or her role as the "enforcer" of policy. To answer the research question, the characteristics of this case were submitted to analysis based on Barry and Crant's Attribution/Expectancy approach to organizational dyads.

According to Barry and Crant (2000) instrumental attributions occur within an organization "when the parties are seen as motivated to maintain the relationship to fulfill role demands, meet organizational obligations, or otherwise make progress toward organizationally relevant goals" (p. 654). The author offers three Barry and Crant propositions relevant for the current study: a) Instrumental attributions are negatively related to favorable relational perceptions, b) an individual's attribution about the other party's instrumental motivation shifts from external to internal causes when the individual perceives the other as disconfirming his or her own goals, and c) hierarchical organizational roles inhibit relational content. Barry and Crant hypothesize that divergence of instrumental attributions influence relational development.

The nature of the department chair's role in annual evaluation and merit raise calculation presents a potential conflict between the chair and faculty when chair's evaluation of a faculty member does not match the faculty member's perception of his or her effort to meet individual and/or organizational goals. The distinction between individual and organizational goals is important as it is possible that the two goals may or may not be similar. It is also possible that the individual perceives the goals to be similar when they may not be. For example, faculty may have the goal

of producing research, which is also an organizational goal. Faculty may perceive their efforts of producing research to be in concert with the organizational goals. However, the effort to produce research by a faculty member in a given year may not reach the standards provided for through faculty-developed policy. When it is the responsibility of the department chair to determine if the faculty member has met the standard, an evaluation that concludes those activities fell short of meeting that standard may be viewed by as disconfirming by the faculty member. An example of this might occur when for a given year the faculty member has presented papers but not published an article. When the standard is publication, any number of presentations cannot be counted as being equivalent to publication.

In the current case, in the second year of the first term, the department chair's evaluation of the faculty member's productivity did not meet the faculty member's perception of the faculty member's productivity. As a consequence, the faculty member filed a grievance with the university. A primary claim within the grievance was that the department chair did not consider the faculty review committee's recommendation, and instead acted in violation of policy. The university grievance committee found in favor of the department chair. Although previously the department chair perceived the relationship between himself and the faculty member was healthy, subsequently over the next several years the relationship had become more strained. The next several years were followed by a series of complaints from the faculty member, culminating in a second formal grievance filed by the faculty member against the department chair. In the second grievance, the faculty member listed a substantial number of perceived slights and wrongdoing by the department chair over a period of five years.

Given Barry and Crant's propositions, it appears likely that the faculty member's attributions of the department chair's internal motivations differed from what the faculty member perceived the instrumental goals of the department should be. In fact, in the second complaint, the faculty member claimed that the department chair was out to directly and intentional obstruct her ability to progress in her academic career, in conflict with the departmental goals of supporting research productivity. Relational communication between the department chair and the faculty member in particular, and with a few other faculty members following a series of complaints with the first faculty member, became strained.

Over the course of several years, communication between the initial complainant and two other faculty members within the department, specifically related to annual evaluation and merit raise calculation, became apparent in conversations the department chair had individually with the other two faculty members. Additionally, conversations between these three faculty members regarding these conflicts were more numerous than those between the individual faculty members and the department chair as derived by chair conversations with the faculty and reviews of emails.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

These observations of internal departmental conflict between the department chair and one faculty member in particular, and two others to a lesser degree, seems to support Barry and Crant's hypothesis that divergence of instrumental attributions influences relational development. A difference in perception of the department chair's role in setting and enforcing annual evaluation

and merit calculation policy set forward a chain of events that led to a strain in the relationship between the department chair and faculty. Although the department chair perceives his relationship to be relatively healthy with the faculty, with one exception, the strain in the relationship with one faculty member may have affected the department as a whole.

From a relational perspective, the trust that one faculty member may have had with the department chair, from the perspective of the faculty member, may have been broken. It is unclear to the department chair how or when this may have occurred. It is possible that the initiation of relational issues may have begun when the chair transitioned from colleague to supervisor in the initial appointment. Bylaws require that the department faculty committee forward two names to the dean for consideration. In the case of this department, the two names that were forwarded to the dean for the term beginning Fall 2010 included the current chair and the faculty member who has filed grievances against the current chair.

Following the findings of the first grievance, it would appear that a negative spiral of distrust has pervaded the attributions of the faculty member toward the department chair. Relational scholars suggest that when trust is broken, it is often very difficult if not impossible to repair. It is also possible that the lone faculty member in this case may begin to feel more and more isolated from other faculty members within the department if attempts to create coalitions against the department chair on grounds of unfair treatment fail.

What the department chair and faculty members within the department perceive to be appropriate interpretation of policies, as well as the department chair's ability to set or enforce policies, may not match the reality of department management within this specific organization. To be sure, faculty within the department are trained at different institutions which may have quite different expectations than the department they have joined. Additionally, expectations of academic freedom and faculty governance inform a sense of autonomy at odds with accountability to others. As Higginson and Joyce (2007) point out, department chairs must "manage" the conflict of individual and department goals. An important role of the academic department manager includes leading the faculty to the conclusion that all members of the department, including the department chair, are responsible for meeting the organizational goals as well as the protection of faculty rights.

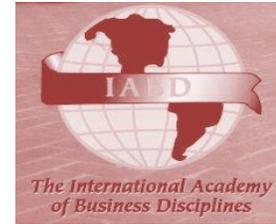
Universities are comprised of departments within colleges, each level of the organization with its own set of goals within the context of a larger organization. Department chairs then also have the responsibility of furthering the departmental goals within the college, while deans have the responsibility of furthering college goals within the university. Future studies might investigate similar role conflict among academic chairs and deans.

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