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Transitioning from Administration to Faculty: Developmental Tasks and Addictions to Break

by

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Abstract

Any type of transition involves challenges. Generally, the more extreme the transition, the more difficult people will find the adjustment process. The present conceptual article provides insight that focuses on one particular transition in higher education. Administrators that transition from their managerial roles to those of “regular faculty” likely will experience internal and external dynamics with which they will need to cope successfully. This article identifies these potential areas and offers insights that are intended to be useful for administrators to make the transition as successful as possible. Administration is not always a uni-direction career path, so advanced preparation can help ensure that soon-to-be former administrators bridge the transition, experiencing optimal vocational success.

Addictions to Break

Administrators typically enjoy five benefits that most often are lost when transitioning from their administrative roles back to regular faculty positions. Each of these become assimilated into the administrator’s job percepts—and the longer the individual serves in administration—the more deeply embedded the elements become. Consequently, I liken these benefits to “addictions” in the sense that when they are taken away, psychological withdrawal symptoms can appear. With advanced and apt preparation, however, I believe most administrators can wean themselves off the addictions and return to a normal level of faculty satisfaction. These addictions include perks, power, income, discretionary spending, and control.

Perks

When signing an administrative contract, personnel seldom are delineated a comprehensive list of perks that come with the position. Nonetheless, once in the role, administrators quickly learn that they receive multiple privileges, sometimes via

serendipity and other times explicitly afforded by the executive division of the university. For example, most administrators have nice offices. This might include the room’s size, office furniture, and view of the campus. They typically have a secretary, administrative assistant, or other support staff. Administrators also tend to be given priority parking spaces which, on some crowded campuses, can be one of the most valued perks available to any university personnel.

Whatever the perks enjoyed, obviously a step from administration to regular faculty status results in losing these perks. This is a transition element about which administrators may not have thoroughly considered when making the step-down decision. If they want a notebook computer, for example, then they no longer enjoy the benefit of automatically being issued one when the campus upgrades university computer systems. They are in the long line of faculty vying for the best items distributed at the time.

Perks hold more value to some administrators than to do to others. Also, the more visible the perk, the more difficult it may be for the administrator to relinquish the privilege. The long walk, for example, on a cold and snowy day—in the plain view of other faculty—may be harder for some administrators to undergo, than lesser obvious perk-losses, such as, say, not being invited to the campus executive holiday party or no longer having a free *Chronicle* subscription. If some loss of perks become viewed as somewhat humbling to the administrator—then the adjustment may be more difficult than if they are quiet benefits no longer enjoyed vis-à-vis the former role and position.

Power

All administrative roles come with varying types, degrees, and levels of power built-into the position. Power is exercised, for example, in assigning others to accomplish tasks. Being able to direct the lives of others is referred to, in social

psychology terms, as legitimate power. This type of authority is necessarily invested in the administrator since it is an important key in accomplishing tasks. Obviously, the former administrator no longer holds this dominance.

There are other types of power, however. For example, administrators typically enjoy information power. They often are the individuals in-the-know. When information is disseminated, they will be on the front-line, relating data to subordinates and deciding who should know what. When returning to their faculty roles, however, these individuals will receive the same content-trickle that others receive, without the privilege of the inside information that led to university decisions, budget implications, future forecasts, and the like.

Administrators can become addicted to power in the sense of possessing the ability for idea implantation. Likely, these individuals have some levels of creativity, vision, and strategic planning—or they would not have been selected for the administrative role. Moreover, these qualities may be difficult to turn-off on a dime, simply due to a formal role change. The former administrator may continue thinking like an administrator—and that is difficult to dislodge. As an administrator, the individual has the right to have others comply with his/her ideas in order to see objectives implemented. In a faculty role, former administrators may continue having the same good ideas, but feel frustrated because they no longer possess the power to have others do the needed tasks for accomplishing the desired objectives.

The power addiction may be most noticed by an administrator when transitioning to a faculty role soon after the administrative replacement is installed. The new administrator will expect submission and make assignments to the former administrator (now faculty member). Intellectually, the former administrator is well aware of the need for obedience. However, on the affective level, this can be challenging at times. This may particularly be true when the new administrator makes decisions that clearly are mistakes—and requires the former administrator to support decisions and implement what may be poor policies.

Income

Perhaps little needs to be said on this point, but it is apt to state the addiction, nonetheless. Administrators simply make more income than regular faculty. Obviously, there may be some exceptions, but in most cases a step-down to regular faculty status also will involve a step-down in annual salary. The administrator will need to make deliberate budget adjustments in personal spending,

lifestyle habits, retirement management, and the like. The extra income can be an addiction—not to the money itself—but to the higher standard of living and lifestyle that eventually will need alteration for most people making this type of professional change.

Discretionary Spending

University administrators are assigned budgets to manage. Some of this money, of course, is designated for particular purposes over which the administrator has little unrestricted decision-making options. For examples, faculty and staff salaries are always the largest line-items in a university budget and administrators cannot spend this money on other matters. However, there typically are numerous other line-items that give administrators significant leeway on how the expenditures can be spent. Obviously, administrators no longer have the ability to tap-into these funds since they become the purview of the new replacement administrator.

Discretionary spending can be an enjoyable benefit of administration. Being able to decide to take trips, for example, that are covered at the university's expense can be a sorely missed addiction by many administrators who change to faculty roles. Similarly, they may no longer enjoy the freedom to, say, make their own travel arrangements, decide the quality of hotel in which they will stay, or the type of restaurants they will enjoy. The point is that someone else will be approving these expenses—and other similar expense decisions. The freedom to spend money on what seems prudent at the time, with lesser accountability than what they will experience as plain faculty members, can be a significant psychological adjustment when making the transition out of administration.

The loss of discretionary spending not only is relinquished with respect to personal expenses, but administrators also lose discretionary spending for others. Often the executive administration gives administrators the freedom to move annual dollar amounts among line-items, so long as the total division's budget ends in the black when the fiscal year closes. This means the administrator sometimes can help others or reward others—while choosing temporarily to cut expenses deemed to be of lower priority. This freedom ends when the individual no longer is in the administrative role and it can be an addiction that proves difficult to overcome—particularly for administrators who have been used to budgets with significant discretionary spending.

Control

There is a real loss of general hegemony that administrators experience when leaving their post. Having a direct say or input into the university decision-making process can be highly addictive. Of

course, sometimes administrators may not possess the actual power that others think they have and often administrators do not hold the power that they indeed should have. But psychologically, just knowing that some level of participation is afforded has an empowering effect on administrators.

This perceived loss of control can be a particularly difficult addiction to break when transitioning from an administrative to faculty role. If the administrator was even moderately effective in the managerial role, then there is some degree of perceptiveness or learning managerial prowess that he/she possesses. Combined with successful experience, the former administrator may be able to see potential consequences of university actions and possess significant insight into how particular situations ought best to be handled.

Without the formal position, however, the former administrator may experience degrees of learned helplessness. This is a phenomenon that occurs when individuals believe they are trapped and without ample means of escape from unpleasant situations. In the present context, former administrators may clearly and accurately size-up future situations at the university, have useful strategies for solving problems, and possess the expertise to implement decisions that would generate favorable outcomes. However, in the new role as a plain faculty member—the ability to exercise the above steps frequently will be out of reach. Without the authority that comes with an administrative position, the faculty member needs to break the control addiction—leaving decisions and their consequences to those presently in charge and responsible for them.

Going Cold Turkey

Given the above five addictions that administrators will need to break as they transition to faculty roles, they also must prepare themselves psychologically for the timing of how this likely will occur. Physical addictions can be broken via both gradual and cold turkey means. The psychological addictions that administrators must break will occur in the latter method.

There comes a day when the desk is cleared, the office is moved, and the power is transferred. When that happens, the addiction withdrawal typically begins. There may be cases where the new administrator extends transitional authority to the former administrator—but in most situations—ruling switches and the faculty member becomes an immediate subordinate. In a matter of a day, the administrator goes from expecting compliance to having conformity expected of him/her. Assignments may be delegated with which he/she disagrees.

Psychological delirium tremens might occur and the former administrator must be prepared for how best to respond—both internally and externally to others.

Developmental Tasks To Accomplish

Given the five addictions that administrators must break, there are eight developmental tasks that they must accomplish in order to successfully make the transition to full-time faculty members. By developmental tasks, I am not speaking in terms of human growth and development issues (e.g., midlife crisis and the like). Rather, I mean psychological goals that must be achieved at this stage of one's professional career in order to see ultimate triumph in the transition process.

1. Enjoy the Benefits

A full-time faculty contracts almost always involves less commitment than does an administrative position. For example, faculty have summers free from teaching responsibilities as well as school-year breaks. Even if the former administrator will have new scholarship productivity requirements, the commitment needed in terms of time spent, emotional drainage, and responsibility will be lessened.

Former administrators need to enjoy this stress reduction. This may be more surprisingly difficult than what one might initially think. Type-A administrators might have to learn or re-learn new ways to spend free time and how best to prioritize their professional and personal lives and commitments. To some degree, life is a series of trading-pleasures. The pleasure that is lost in terms of administrative benefits can be compensated for by the pleasures gained via the new faculty role. Enjoying and savoring these freedoms can help take the edge off the emotional pain that may accompany the loss of administrative benefits.

2. Chart the Future

While it often is good to spend some transition time in reflection and reassessment, there comes a point where administrators who transition to full-time faculty positions must chart new courses for their lives. Do they wish to retire in their new faculty role? Does administration likely have some future place in their life? How will this change likely affect the other aspects of their lives and their family's lives (e.g., free tuition for children, caring for aging parents, assurances of future job security, etc.)?

Successful administrators can see big-pictures and keep those objectives focused in accomplishing larger aims. These skills must be applied to the former-administrator's own life. Spouses likely will want to know how the former administrator envisions the future as will friends, family members, and others who have personal

involvements in the administrator's life. The former administrator needs, not only to come to personal terms with what that future direction will be—but also aptly to communication that future direction to others in his/her life.

3. Develop New Challenges

Regardless of what direction the former administrator takes, he/she needs to appraise new challenges as part of that direction. For example, if the administrator decides to teach until retirement, then what types of scholarship productivity goals will be involved? Also, what types of new teaching improvements will be implemented in his/her classroom? If the administrator decides that, say, returning to industry is desired, then how will he/she best prepare for a market place that likely changed significantly since the former administrator last held a full-time job in the field? The point is that all professionals should have future challenges. There needs to be a sense of excitement and preparation for achieving new levels of excellence. Without this, the former administrator may fall into professional moratorium and stagnate.

4. Overcome Any Potential Hard Feelings

There are some administrators who leave their positions simply because they accomplished what they intended and are professionally ready and desirous of returning to the classroom and research. However, in many other situations (or, perhaps even most?), the administrator left the post due to pressures. These forces may have been external or explicit (e.g., fired) or they may have been more internal or implicit (e.g., it became clear that stepping-down would be needful in the situation). In any event, administrators may leave their positions feeling emotionally troubled.

Research shows that bitterness is not good for physical, emotional, or psychological health. Administrators must come to terms with the circumstances that led to their present transition. In some cases, counseling may be helpful in processing the transition in a healthy manner. By whatever means, former administrators must move to their new positions on the high-road and not conveying to others overly negative emotional reactions. Sarcasm, slander, and explicit ill will may result in former administrators taking their negative emotional baggage to their new roles, sabotaging potential future success.

5. Maintaining Emotional Equilibrium

Repeatedly in this article I purport that transitioning from administrative to full-time faculty roles is a difficult process. Regardless of the circumstances that led to the change, adjustment may be emotionally difficult and administrators must sus-out a plan for maintaining their emotional

equilibrium. Some days will be more difficult than others and when those days occur—having some type of fluid plan for handling these feelings is important.

Generally, former administrators should avoid making rash decisions. Joining the Peace Corps, as an extreme example, might not be the most prudent course of action for an administrator to make when leaving the managerial role. There may be unfilled professional and/or personal aims to pursue—but all major life decisions should be made with good input and counsel from friends, family, and others who know the individual well.

Likewise, budgeting some alone time may be prudent for individuals moving from administration to faculty roles. That is, having a get-away retreat where one has time to reflect on larger life issues can be a useful means of sifting through life options and making ordinal choices regarding future directions. In some cases, just having time to cry or otherwise express deep feelings without feeling pressure from others can be psychologically healthy for these transition times.

6. Have a Circle of Support

All humans require social support. Further, such support is particularly more valuable at certain points in life than it is during others. Life transitions, such as moving from administration to faculty, likely result in social support having a potentially weighty role for most individuals. Friends and family can help sort through emotions, confront reality, help size-up future ambitions, and provide emotional comfort when needed.

E-mail and telephone calls obviously have their place in the communication circle. However, during times of significant professional transitions, such as moving from administration to faculty roles, having the benefit of personal, face-to-face connections is particularly important. It might be worth an individual's time to make a trip or two, visiting mentors or others who have intimate and longstanding knowledge of the former administrator. Such individuals can help provide needed emotional support and also objectively assist with drafting new life courses of action for the former administrator's future professional career.

7. Reground in Content and Professional Expertise

In almost all cases, administrative positions become professionally-consuming. That is, administrators may be able to keep their fingers in some part-time professional involvements, but most of their time and available energies are devoted to their administrative responsibilities. For example, administrators might teach a class, or consult in industry, or maintain a small private practice. But they largely will not be current in their respective

fields; at least they will not be current in terms of what will be expected of them in a new full-time role.

Consequently, administrators transitioning to full-time faculty roles need to re-tool. This might involve catching-up on the latest scholarship or theories in their teaching field. Likely, the administrator has not published significantly while carrying full-time administrative responsibilities. Reading current books, journal articles, and reconnecting with professional organizations will be needed in order to aptly transition to a full-time faculty role.

The important point here is that the former administrators should not deceive themselves into thinking that they simply can step back into their former full-time faculty positions—and not to have missed a beat. This simply is unrealistic. Obviously, different administrators will require varying amounts of time to reconnect with their former teaching domains—but all must budget into their lives time for this type of retooling. The students whom they will teach and others who will depend on their work products deserve professional excellence, and this requires the former administrators to bring themselves back up to current speed with their respective academic fields.

8. Resist the Temptation of Meddling

I saved what may be the most difficult developmental task for last. Some administrators who transition to faculty roles will do so at their current university and others will move on to new institutions. In either case, administrators invariably will find themselves tempted at times to pry into the respective current administrative situation.

Former administrators may tell themselves that they are beyond this temptation. Some might even be in denial. But the reality is that administration changes people. Administrators begin to think in a qualitatively different ways than how they thought prior to taking the administration position. This is not unique to administrators. Lawyers, for example, think in a qualitatively different way after graduating from law school than they did prior to law school. Even attorneys who stop actively practicing law—still think differently than they did prior to attending law school. It messes with one's mind.

In the present context, former administrators must re-program their thinking—at least to some degree—in order to be successful in their new faculty roles. They must think like scholars, teachers, theorists, and professors—not like budget managers, arbitrators, rule enforcers, and university leaders. Obviously, this is not a turn on/turn off function. But there is a healthy degree of shift that must occur.

Professors who think, act, behave, and speak like administrators likely will not be as successful professors as those who do so as faculty members.

There likely will be times when the new administrator will seek input from present full-time faculty members who formally served as administrators. This simply is wise conduct and prudent behavior. In these situations, former administrators should feel free to share insights and perspectives. However, former administrators must await the current administrators to initiate such invitations. Doing otherwise easily may be interpreted by the current administrator as meddling. Unless this input is sought, the former administrator must focus attention, thinking, and behavior in terms of his/her present role: a full-time faculty member.

Summary Conclusions

Transitioning from a position of administrator to a faculty member role is fraught with challenges. The first step in meeting these challenges successfully is to recognize the dynamics that likely will be occurring. The present article is intended to help contribute toward that end. But recognizing the factors is insufficient for making the transition successful.

Taking deliberate and affirmative steps of action is required. Breaking the addiction cycle likely will occur abruptly and preparing oneself beforehand, mentally and psychologically, can be crucial to conquering the task. Likely, assistance from others will be part of making the transition as smooth as possible. That is, it is important to have others in one's life who conceptually grasp the challenges faced by the former administrator and can aptly help the individual to make prudent life choices. Even the most capable professionals require social support and assistance to maintain clarity of thought and affect during difficult transition periods in life. Academe has numerous faculty members who have successfully made the transition. The principles in the present article are proactively intended to assist in seeing this occur as smoothly as possible.

About the Author

Michael W. Firmin earned his Ph.D. from Syracuse University and serves as professor and chair of the psychology department at Cedarville University in Cedarville, OH. He is a licensed psychologist in the state of OH and has taught college for 20 years. Dr. Firmin has over 50 journal article publications, over 100 national conference presentations, directs a national research conference, and serves as a journal editor.