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10-17-2018

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Scholarly Commons Citation

Faulconer, E. K. (2018). Nurturing Faculty Buy-In for Top-Down Mandates. *The Department Chair*, 29(2). Retrieved from <https://commons.erau.edu/publication/1423>

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Nurturing Faculty Buy-In for Top-Down Mandates

By: Emily Faulconer

Higher education is a bureaucracy. As such, colleges and universities require strong leaders but they also must have committed faculty members. Shared governance and transparency - arguably empty buzz words - have definitions that will vary based on who you ask. Despite the minefield, these terms are relevant when discussing change within academia.

Administrative decisions may grow from bottom-up innovation, shared governance, or a combination of the two, resulting in more representation in the decision-making process. Shared governance does not mean that each stakeholder participates in every stage of a decision-making process. It *does* mean that no single stakeholder has complete control over the process.

Administrative decisions may also be top-down mandates. This concept should not be immediately met with scorn and derision; there is a time and a place for this management strategy, particularly when the mandate is addressing evidence-based best practices. Transparency can nurture faculty buy-in for top-down decisions.

When department chairs are faced with implementing a top-down mandate, their key role is fostering faculty buy-in, without which a significant amount of time and energy can be wasted on fighting against the institution. This resistance can awkwardly position department chairs in between two key stakeholders - the faculty and the administration. No matter which levels of the higher education hierarchy you're analyzing, miscommunication of issues is common. Department chairs must be prepared for their communications to be interpreted in multiple ways due to biases, diverse perspectives, and misunderstandings. To garner support from faculty for top-down mandates, department chairs can employ several of Howard Gardner's strategies for changing someone's mind. Department chairs should communicate the following clearly and often:

- description of the problem being addressed
- rationale and defined goals of the mandate
- evidence or data to justify the action(s)
- explanation of what alternatives were considered but not selected
- measurable outcomes of the mandate
- resources allotted towards the mandate and rewards to incentivize adoption of the mandate

Faculty buy-in is not a prerequisite to implementing a mandate. However, faculty that do not understand the mandate or prefer alternative solutions to the problem, may comply resentfully or, worse, outright resist. Another strategy for changing minds presented by Gardner is actively identifying notable resistances to an idea and defusing them. While it is too late for authentic shared governance by the time a mandate is being disseminated to faculty, the department chair can encourage questions and conversation about the mandate. Encouraging conversation around dissenting opinions provides an opportunity to change minds rather than squash alternative perspectives. It also provides a unique opportunity to clarify, identify assumptions, and find common ground. This opportunity for conversation also lets faculty know that the administration remains open to alternatives in strategy, implementation timeline, or resource allocation.

Transparency into a decision does not mean that *all* of the possible information is disclosed. Transparency, instead, is more about the *why* and *how* of the decision. Ideally, faculty members trust administrators to make decisions. Ideally, administrators trust faculty to be collaborators in implementing and improving on decisions. If department chairs must play monkey in the middle with a top-down mandate, being transparent and communicative can help sell the top-down mandate with an echo of shared governance. Through the efforts of department chairs, hierarchical decisions can still feel like a partnership.