JACA
3(1997): 218-224

# The Department Chair: A Symbolic Perspective and Some Implications

D. F. TREADWELL

ASSUMING appropriate academic qualifications, most institutional requirements for a department chair are academic leadership, administrative leadership, successful teaching, active scholarship, and in some cases professional experience. Consider this advertisement for a communication department chair (*Chronicle,* 1995):

> The chair is the principle academic and administrative officer of the department. The primary role is to "facilitate the academic enterprise." The successful candidate will have an earned doctorate; a record of teaching, scholarly accomplishment, and industry activity commensurate with a tenured appointment; commitment to excellence in general education and to undergraduate and graduate education in a liberal arts and sciences setting; administrative experience comparable to department chair, three or more years' industry experience and three or more years' experience teaching in mass communication, telecommunications, or journalism programs; demonstrated leadership in organization and financial management; commitment to equal employment opportunity and to the value of intellectual and cultural diversity; a leadership style that emphasizes openness, consultation, and shared governance; dedication to seeking a balance between the scholarship of teaching, research and creative activities, and professional development and service as criteria for distribution of rewards and benefits; proven success and continuing interest in securing external funds. (p. B8)

Because teaching and scholarship are normally expected of all faculty, the broad roles that seem unique to the chair are academic and administrative leadership, resource acquisition and allocation, and constituent relationships/boundary spanning.

The chair's tenure is critical for departments in terms of resource acquisition; internal and external communication; educational initiatives, standards, and evaluation; and esprit de corps. It is also critical for the institution. Barge and Musambira (1992) argue that the chair is a key figure in higher education administration and governance, if not the most important university or college administrator. Tucker (1984) points out that a brilliant university or college administration with inept chairs cannot survive; an inept administration, with the help of a group of brilliant chairs, usually can.

The chair faces a variety of competing allegiances and pressures. Seagren, Creswell and Wheeler (1993) describe the academic chair metaphorically as a block of wood held in a vice for shaping. "The chair is squeezed between the demands of upper administration and institutional expectations on the one side and the expectations of faculty, staff, and students on the other, with both attempting to influence and shape the chair. The chair is caught in the middle, required to provide the most sophisticated leadership and statesmanship to avoid being crushed by these two opposing forces" ( p. iii).

Typically, the new chair faces a significantly new set of roles with perfunctory, if any, orientation. While there is an accessible literature (Tucker, 1984; Spicer & Staton, 1992; Seagren, Creswell & Wheeler, 1993; Creswell, Wheeler, Seagren, Egly & Beyer, 1990), few chairs appear to be formally prepared for this role before appointment or educated in any systematic way for the role after appointment other than by some form of institutional osmosis. Some preliminary administrative experience may come from service on or chairing governance committees, and from such duties as class allocation and scheduling.

Typically chairs come from faculty ranks by election, appointment or rotation. The process often generates tension even before the appointment takes place, particularly if the chair is elected. Candidates move into an interim no-man's land as soon as the process begins. Faculty involvement on behalf of a candidate ranges from active campaigning to neutrality; it rarely involves disinterest.

From the requirements for a chair is born a tension of distance between candidates and colleagues, and among colleagues are born rifts based on competing visions of the future. Eble (1986) writes, "Those who want the position are often ruled out for their wanting it. Those who don't want it are often, and unwisely, forced into it. Those who assume the office must face a disdain for administration from many of their colleagues and even from themselves" (p. 2).

Other tensions include competing student-faculty demands and time management decisions—whether to solve immediate small problems at the expense of time spent on larger problems. There are tensions of personal style—whether to adopt a chameleon-like adaptability to changing circumstances and personalities or to maintain a personal consistency. At some point in the process there are also key 'turning point' tensions as critical events define or redefine professional and personal relationships between the chair and colleagues (Barge & Musambira, 1992). Chairs may face a turning point in terms of preferred communication style as they become managers or leaders. For example, an autocratic style typically does not make friends in an academic environment but may be necessitated in terms of the need for instant decision making and time saving.

## THE CHAIR AS LEADER: SYMBOLIC OR SUBSTANTIVE?

The absolute centrality of communication to successful management has been identified at least since the 1930's when Barnard (1938) recognized that willing cooperation can only be elicited and that elicitation requires communication. Theoretical groundings for the chair's relations with colleagues can be traced from such "classic" management authors as Weber (1947), Taylor (1916), and Fayol (1949), who advocate an autocratic view of management with communication role specialization through authors such as Follett (1926), Woodward (1965), and Vroom & Yetton (1973) who argue the situational nature of management, to writers such as McGregor (1960) and Likert (1961) who propose a democratic approach to management with broad communication role specialization. The shift over time is essentially from work-related, directive communication to consultative communication with both work and personal components. Authors such as Calder (1982) have summarized such changes in thinking about leadership over time. Contemporary authors such as Peters (1991) have extended these ideas to propose a loosening of structure, self-directed work teams, and the virtual elimination of middle management (which in an academic environment is typically the department chair).

From such literature I suggest two advances in thinking that are especially relevant to the chair's role:

1. The distinction between management and leadership as the difference between routine maintenance and "visionary," future-oriented leadership. The chair should recognize the need for departments to have a long-term vision, goal, or image of the future that can be compelling and motivational to others.

2. Organizational theorists have increasingly recognized the importance of individuals' subjective responses to their organizations and of assessing the nature and role of this subjectivity (e.g., Cragan and Shields, 1995).

The notion of academic leadership as influencing collective or shared subjectivities that I propose provides a basis for the chair to reconcile many of the tensions outlined above. The relevant literature is broadly that of organizational symbolism and its relationship to leadership. There is rich literature on symbolic devices and such subjective structures such as metaphor, saga, stories, and image that are thought to create and explain communities, and of the role of leaders and members in creating and nurturing them. The following paragraphs outline some of this literature and suggest how these subjective structures might be used as a basis for academic leadership.

The importance of subjectivity to leadership is addressed by authors such as Calder (1982) who propose studying leadership as something we say about other people; that is it is a judgment and inference made on the basis of observation of a leader's behavior. Leadership is then a class of behaviors different from those exhibited by the rest of the group. The leader is in a sense a deviate—though a positive deviate. For example, people who talk more may be more likely to be perceived as leaders. If at the same time positive changes are taking place in the organization, people will attribute a causal relationship between these and the leader's behavior. If this association holds up over time and is supported by others the attribution of leadership is reinforced.

Frew (1973) argues that leadership has two components: structural from the position of organizational authority and personal—"that unexplainable and undefinable personal characteristic which appears to endow certain individuals with interpersonal power over others in certain situations" (p. 117). He concludes also that leadership is essentially a perceptual characteristic and found perceived goal similarity a relatively strong predictor of perceived leadership effectiveness.

Barge (1992) argues that the "one-best-style-of-leadership" school of thought cannot refute the mounting evidence that the effectiveness of leadership varies according to situational elements. If leadership is regarded as problem solving, then leaders' behavior will vary with the problem to be solved. Drawing from Weick (1979), Barge argues that leadership involves reducing complex and ambivalent information to a manageable level of understanding and action; the leader must help group members set up an organizing system (rules and procedures) suitable for limiting the number of interpretations than can be derived from information the group has.

Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) argue that the literature on job attitudes has ignored the social context of work. They believe that individuals adapt attitudes, behavior and beliefs to their social context and that the social environment provides cues which individuals use to construct and interpret events. Many organizations add their own rationalizing mythology to the social construction of work proffered by society. Uniforms, titles, organizational sagas, company newspapers, and stories about organizational accomplishments all facilitate the development of a mythology which provides meaning, importance, and justification to work activities. The social environment provides information about what one's attitudes and opinions should be. It focuses individuals on particular aspects of the environment and provides an interpretation or construction of meaning of the environment.

Pfeffer (1977) proposes that the notion of leadership is ambiguous in both definition and measurement. He argues that the effects of leaders are quite small because when leaders are selected only certain, limited styles of behavior are chosen. Once in a leadership position, the discretion and behavior of the leader are constrained. Leadership typically affects only a few of the variables that impact the organization or organizational performance. (For example, a department chair probably has relatively little effect on significant institutional or environmental variables such as the economy, student demographics, enrollments, major facilities, or faculty contract negotiations.)

Like Calder, Pfeffer argues that leadership is attributed by observers. People gain control over their lives by applying their own knowledge of causal relationships. By having a designated leadership, control is more readily exercised by having causality lodged in one person rather than in a complex set of relationships. Changes (control) can thus be more readily exercised by replacing or influencing the occupant of the chair's position. Leaders are basically therefore symbolic. The leader is in part an actor. Successful leaders are those who can be seen to associate themselves with organizational success and dissociate themselves from organizational failures. The successful leader manipulates symbols to make the correct associations (e.g., being highly visible when external factors such as the economy make for departmental growth).

Pondy (1978) argues that leadership is applied to a "pastiche of behaviors, ranging from that of foreman to that of prophet" (p. 87). He dislikes the notion of leadership "style" and argues that what was probably an original notion of "the whole manner" or deep structure has been lost to an interest in superficial style or behavior. He argues for looking at the less visible influences such as language overlap and language subtleties such as "the department have" versus "the department has." He argues that the effectiveness of leaders lies in their ability to make activities meaningful for the group so they become social facts. "The real power of Martin Luther King was not only that he had a dream, but that he could describe it, that it became public, and therefore accessible to millions of people" (p. 93).

Pfeffer (1981) argues that substantive actions and results are largely the result of external factors beyond the control of the individual or organization. The area over which the manager does have control is the expressive, symbolic or language level. Pfeffer sees organizations as systems of shared meaning and beliefs in which a critical administrative activity is the construction and maintenance of belief systems which assure compliance, commitment and positive affect on the part of participants regardless of how they fare in the contest for resources. An important defining characteristic of organizations is that there are consensually shared perceptions and definitions of the world. Frequent communication leads to a more common set of understandings about the organization and its environment.

Such social consensus can literally affect the well being of the unit. Pfeffer cites the closure of the School of Criminology at UC Berkeley in 1974. One of the three reasons given for closing the school was that "the faculty has been unable to agree on a . . . curriculum that reflects a broadly shared vision of the field. These weaknesses may be attributable to the state of criminology generally, but it appears that continuing disagreement within the faculty has prevented the establishment of common goals and would continue to do so" (p. 25).

The above review suggests that ambiguities and tensions inherent in the chair's relationship to the department might be resolved in terms of how colleagues individually and collectively are led to interpret the chair's work and that of the department. The chair's major role then is to develop subjective structures that provide shared comprehension and rationalize the department's activities. To the extent that the chair can influence stories, interpretations of the environment, rituals, and the relative salience of competing beliefs, employees will adapt their beliefs, attitudes and behaviors to this social construct. This becomes especially important with new faculty (O'Reilly & Caldwell, 1981; Dolan, 1988).

The expression of these subjective structures, by which the chair can also assess progress take the form of, for instance, myths, stories, sagas, and departmental culture.

## DISCUSSION

Pfeffer's (1977) view suggests that chairs have relatively little control over tangible resources such as budgets and facilities, but can influence the symbolic environment of their department. The literature reviewed here suggests that this is in fact a more essential activity anyway. (A chair fortunate enough to significantly influence resources still has the problem of interpreting and explaining these resource changes to colleagues.) The communication literature suggests that the effective tools for the chair are not the budgets, spreadsheets, and evaluation forms, but the stories, interpretations, images and culture which the chair can influence.

Fundamentally the chair must reduce complex and ambivalent information to a manageable level of understanding and action. Barge concludes that leaders must be as complex as the information environment they confront. Leaders must be effective at networking and data collection in order to gather information about the environment. They must have an ability to make sense of the information environment and an ability to articulate the environment in a way that reduces equivocality for members.

The chair must have the psychological and information-processing ability to read and interpret the environment, and the ability to bring to the group an interpretation of the environment that makes collective sense, reduces the ambivalence and provides a motivational base for group and individual action.

Organizational communication studies have provided more than enough literature for chairs to find a comfortable theoretical grounding for their behavior. The problem is that contracts, faculty, administrators and perhaps the chairs' own discourse deconstruct what is a complex and holistic set of behaviors into a set of separate 'cells' such as administration, leadership, advising, recruitment. It is like trying to understand a hand by looking at each finger separately. The chair's role has to be best understood as an integrative performance, as well as symbolic.

This approach has at least two interesting implications for chairs and departments. First, if leadership is a perception it cannot be taught as a skill (Calder, 1982). How then does one acquire the ability to be regarded as a successful chair? Presumably the answer lies in training and experiences that emphasize the political, dramaturgical, and language skills more than analytical or strictly quantitative (Pfeffer, 1981). Frank (1989) argues that without effective communication to develop and implement strategic plans, the probability of translating goals into action would be about 10 percent. Doing this effectively by managing symbolic structures requires the use of language, ceremonies, settings, and ceremonies. Frank (1989) argues that "the reward system must support the communication strategy . . . . Those who communicate effectively are rewarded. Those who don't, aren't. Since a manager's job is eighty to ninety percent communicating, let his performance review reflect this (i.e., a minimum of 50 percent weight on communication factors)" (p. 13).

A second, structural, problem is that socialization into the chair's role is a developmental process that takes place over years. For new managers, Buchanan (1974) poses three stages of socialization that are not complete until around year five. For faculty there is a similar institutional time frame in that academic institutions do not expect satisfactory socialization (tenure) until around year five. From Buchanan we can argue that year one for chairs is "basic training," years two to four are application or performance years, with years five and beyond being an output/maturation period.

But developing subjective structures takes time and careful cultivation. The chair, dependent on evolving a compelling organizational saga, faces Clark's (1972) assessment that these may take years to develop. Frank (1989) argues, "Don't expect a quick fix or quick results. Cultural changes require about five years of consistent effort and support" (p. 13).

In summary, the rhetorical ability to develop appropriate symbolic structures for departments is the essence of the chair's role and a way to reconcile the many tensions inherent in the job; conventional management training may be inappropriate. Also, for some chairs, the term of office may be too short to develop the symbolism needed to sustain their activities, which may be subjectively misconstrued as a result.

## REFERENCES AND NOTES

**D. F. Treadwell** (Ph.D., Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 1987) is Professor of Communication at Westfield State College, Westfield, MA 01086.

A version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association in San Antonio, TX, November, 1995.

Barge, J. K. (1992). Leadership as Organizing. In R. S. Cathcart & L. A. Samovar (Eds.), *Small group communication: A reader* (6th ed.) pp. 477- 494.

Barge, J. K., & Musambira, G. W. (1992). Turning points in the chair-faculty relationships. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 20*, 54-77.

Barnard, C. (1938). *The functions of the executive.* Cambridge. MA: Harvard University Press.

Buchanan, B. (1974). Building organizational commitment: The socialization of managers in work situations. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 19*, 533-546.

Calder B. J. (1982). An attribution theory of leadership. In B. M. Staw & G. R. Salancik, *New Directions in Organizational Behavior.* Malabar, FL: Krieger.

*Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 14, 1995, p. B8.

Clark, B. R. (1972). The organizational saga in higher education. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 17*, 178-184.

Cragan, J. F., & Shields, D. C. (1995). *Symbolic theories in applied communication research.* Cresskil, NJ: Hampton.

Creswell, J., Wheeler, D. W., Seagren, A. T., Egly, N. J., & Beyer, K. D. (1990). *The Academic Chairperson's Handbook.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Dolan, K. (1988, November). *A preliminary test of outcomes of formal and informal socialization.* Paper presented at annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, New Orleans, LA.

Eble, K. (1986). Chairpersons and faculty development. *The Department Advisor, 1*, 1-5.

Fayol, H. (1949). *General and Industrial Management.* Trans. by Constance Storrs. London: Pitman.

Follett, M. P. (1926). The giving of orders. In H.C. Metcalf (Ed.), *Scientific foundations of business administration.* Baltimore: William & Ws.

Frank, A. D. (1989, November). *Planning strategically for communication: A holistic approach.* Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association annual conference, San Francisco, CA.

Frew, D. R. (1973). Perceptions of leadership effectiveness and organizational ideology. *Management International Review, 13*(45), 117-125.

Likert, R. (1961). *New patterns of management.* New York: McGrawHill.

McGregor, D. (1967). *The human side of enterprise.* New York: McGraw Hill.

O'Reilly, C. A., & Caldwell, D. F. (1981). The commitment and job tenure of new employees: Some evidence of post-decisional justification. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 26*, 597-616.

Peters, T. (1991). *Beyond hierarchy: Organizations in the 1990s.* NewYork: Knopf.

Pfeffer, J. (1977). The ambiguity of leadership. *Academy of Management Review 2*, 104-112.

Pfeffer, J. (1981). Management as symbolic action: The creation and maintenance of organizational paradigms. In L.L. Cummings & Barry Staw *(Eds.), Research in Organizational Behavior,* vol. 3, (pp. 1-52). Greenwich: JAI Press.

Pondy, L. R. (1978). Leadership is a language game. In M. McCall & M. Lombardo (Eds.), *Leadership: Where else can we go?* (pp. 87-99). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Salancik, G. R., & Pfeffer J. (1978). A social information processing approach to job attitudes and task design. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 23*, 224-249.

Seagren, A. T., Creswell, J. W., & Wheeler, D. W. (1993). *The department chair: New role, responsibilities and challenges,* Higher Education Report No. 1, Washington, DC: ASHE-ERIC.

Spicer, C. H., & Staton, A. Q. (1992). Introduction. In M. Hickson & D. W. Stacks (Eds.), *Effective communication for academic chairs.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Taylor, F. (1916, December). The principles of scientific management. *Bulletin of the Taylor Society, 11*, 13-23.

Tucker, A. (1984). *Chairing the academic department: Leadership among peers.* Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

Vroom, V., & Yetton, P. W. (1973). *Leadership and decision making.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Weber, M. (1947). *The theory of social and economic organizations.* Translated by A. M. Henderson & T. Parsons. New York: Free Press.

Weick, K. E. (1979). *The social psychology of organizing.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Woodward, J. (1965). *Industrial organization: Theory and practice.* London: 0xford University Press.