

Department Chairs and Learning from Experience

Ray W. Francis, Visiting Assistant Professor, Higher Education Administration, The George Washington University. Written specifically for the ACE Department Chair Online Resource Center, 2007.

The transition from faculty member to department head can be extremely difficult for chairs as they move from a highly individualized position to one that requires leading and managing others (Gmelch & Parkay, 1999; Green & McDade, 1991; Hecht, 2004). Generally, their backgrounds have been primarily in teaching, research, and public service (Hecht, Higgerson, Gmelch, & Tucker, 1999). And as Wergin (2003) points out, “Many chairs, in fact, cringe at the thought of having to lead their peers” (p. 1). A successful transition requires chairs to develop new ways of handling on-the-job challenges as they become exposed to different workplace experiences. Insofar as institutions often fail to provide management skills training, new chairs are left to learn from their on-the-job experiences (Gmelch, Reason, Schuh, & Shelley, 2002).

The research literature has suggested that many of the skills necessary for successful leaders and managers are learned from experience rather than from formal training programs (Mathis & Jackson, 2006; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). In fact, experience, arising from a diversity of workplace demands and requirements, may contribute to an individual’s development by providing new opportunities for learning and growth (Brett, 1984; Nicholson & West, 1988; Seibert, Hall, & Kram, 1995) because these opportunities may cause individuals to seek new ways in which to resolve workplace problems and issues (Hill, 2003; McCauley, Ohlott, & Ruderman, 1989).

Learning from experience is not a simple process. The literature has noted that individuals may develop the most when they learn from experience by employing a variety of tactics to confront new and unfamiliar situations (Dalton, 1999; Davies & Easterby-Smith, 1984). Dalton, in particular, has suggested that the individual who can use a variety of tactics possesses *learning versatility*. Dalton (1999) defines learning versatility as the ability of individuals to expand their learning tactics when faced with novel situations and experiences, and her model postulates four learning tactics: action, thinking, feeling, and accessing others. Dalton explains that by increasing the number of tactics that they use to confront workplace situations, chairs may become more versatile learners and take advantage of the lessons their experiences provide. Let’s take a closer look at these four tactics.

KEY LEARNING TACTICS

Action learning tactics are activities that occur through direct experience (Dalton, 1999 & 2001). People who use actions tactics confront challenges by doing and by learning from the effects of the situation. For example, a chair has been in her position for almost a year and must now complete faculty evaluations. She has never prepared faculty evaluations before and wants to perform this task well. The chair decided she

needs training and contacts the university director of faculty personnel to arrange a class on faculty evaluations. During the class, the chair learns how to prepare a faculty evaluation and give feedback. The chair learned by doing.

Chairs who use *thinking learning tactics* work out their options through reflection and then “anticipate the future through cognitive rehearsal” (Dalton, 1999, p. 6). Consider a chair’s handling of a difficult employee. The employee had been disruptive several times over the last year and the chair is unsure of how to handle the problem. The chair decides to meet with representatives from the university human resources department and is given several options on how to handle the situation. The chair considers these options and decides which one to employ. During his reflection, the chair also decides that in the future he will never allow an employee problem to last this long again.

Chairs who use the *feeling learning tactic* manage the anxiety that is associated with a difficult situation (Dalton, 1999). Rather than lose an opportunity to engage in an unfamiliar situation or new experience because of fear and anxiety, a chair may use this tactic by talking to a friend, boss, or associate before confronting a problem. For example, a chair might find it difficult to inform a colleague that she did not receive tenure. The chair has known this person for a long time and finds the individual to be a wonderful teacher and researcher. The chair knows this will hurt his colleague and she will probably leave the university. The chair has a lot of anxiety over this problem and does not know how to handle the situation. He speaks to another colleague who gives him advice and guidance. It takes some time, but from this action, the chair decides how he will speak to his colleague.

Finally, the *accessing others learning tactic* involves looking for “advice, support, counsel, coaching, or formal training” from people who have had similar work experience (Dalton, 1999, p. 7). Consider a new chair who has no financial experience but who has decided to learn more about the university budgeting process so she can develop a strategic plan for her department. She makes this process one of her annual performance goals. As part of her annual personal development program, the chair has set a goal of becoming more adept at using the accessing others learning tactic. The chair decides to attend several university seminars on budgeting so that she can learn more about the process and the effect it has on her department. She decides to seek out a point of contact in the budgeting office who can help her when she has budgeting questions. In addition, as another resource, she plans to contact a former department chair who has experience developing budgets. In this scenario, the chair is working toward her performance goal by attending budgeting seminars and toward her personal development goal of being more proficient with the accessing others learning tactic by contacting knowledgeable individuals in the field.

In summary, using all four learning tactics may enable chairs to achieve the most learning versatility and take advantage of the lessons provided by their on-the-job experiences. Becoming more versatile learners may also contribute to their leadership and management development (Dalton, 1999; Davies &

Easterby-Smith, 1984; McCauley et al., 1989). Chairs may learn the most when they have a repertoire of tactics to call on when faced with novel and unfamiliar workplace situations. Experience and learning versatility may therefore encourage chairs to engage more frequently in workplace challenges, which in turn may contribute to their development.

PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

There are numerous ways to implement the ideas highlighted above. Chairs could benefit from exposure to learning tactics and versatility in their orientations and training. Academic institutions could provide resources and training to department chairs to help them discover the learning tactics they use in the workplace. This type of training would also help promote the learning chairs need to face workplace challenges. If chairs are aware of the learning tactics they use, they may become more comfortable with this aspect of their development. Although there is no empirical evidence linking learning tactics with management effectiveness, this connection has face validity, and this type of training could augment the professional development of department chairs.

REFERENCES

- Brett, J. M. (1984). Job transitions and personal and role development. In K. M. Rowland & G.R. Ferris (vol. 2) (Eds.), *Personnel and human resources management* (pp. 155–183). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Dalton, M. (1999). *Learning tactics inventory*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Dalton, M. (2001). *Becoming a more versatile learner*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.
- Davies, J., & Easterby-Smith, M. (1984). Learning and developing from managerial work experiences. *Journal of Management Studies*, 21(3), 169–183.
- Gmelch, W.H., & Parkay, F. W. (1999). *Becoming a department chair: Negotiating the transition from scholar to administrator*. Paper presented at the 1999 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association.
- Gmelch, W. H., Reason, R. D., Schuh, J. H., & Shelley, M. C. (2002). *The call for academic leaders: The academic leadership forum evaluation report*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University, College of Education.
- Green, M. F., & McDade, S. A. (1991). *Investing in higher education: A handbook of leadership development*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

- Hecht, I. W. D. (2004). The professional development of department chairs. In W. Gmelch & J. H. Schuh (Eds.), *The life cycle of a department chair* (pp. 27-44). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hecht, I. W. D., Higginson, M. L., Gmelch, W. H., & Tucker, A. (1999). *The department chair as academic leader*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.
- Hill, L. A. (2003). *Becoming a manager*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Mathis, R. L., & Jackson, J. H. (2006). *Human resource management* (11th ed.). Cincinnati, OH: South-Western.
- McCall, M. W., Jr., Lombardo, M., & Morrison, A. M. (1988). *The lessons of experience*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- McCauley, C. D., Ohlott, P. J., & Ruderman, M. N. (1989). On-the-job development: A conceptual model and preliminary investigation. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, 1(4), 142–158.
- Nicholson, N., & West, M. (1988). *Managerial job change: men and women in transition*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Seibert, K. W., Hall, D. T., & Kram, K. (1995). Strengthening the weak link in strategic executive development: Integrating individual development and global business strategy. *Human Resources Management*, 34, 529–547.
- Wergin, J. F. (2003). *Departments that work*. Bolton, MA: Anker.