DIAGNOSING COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS OF ACADEMIC CHAIRS: APPLIED COMMUNICATION IN CONTEXT

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Recently there has been an attempt among communication scholars to develop an agenda for the future of applied communication research (Weick & Browning, 1991; March, 1991; Plax, 1991). One commonality among these essayists and others (Kreps, Frey, & O'Hair, 1991) who support applied communication research, as well as one (Ellis, 1991) who previously took a negative position but now takes a more positive one, is the view that such research should be receiver-based (Ellis, 1991, p. 118) and should "help people resolve socially relevant problems" (Kreps, Frey & O'Hair, 1991, p. 83).

Put in perspective, audience analysis, or as some have put it "defining the situation," is the proper first step in the conduct of applied inquiry. Applied research must be context-bound. Despite the fact that hospitals, law firms, automobile assembly plants, and academic departments in colleges and universities all have a concern with organizational communication problems, these general types of organizations differ and their problems differ. While generalizable theory is a worthy goal of applied communication research, it must be recognized that many generalizations, even to a context category, may need to be limited. Communication problems most likely vary from hospital to hospital, from law firm to law firm, from assembly plant to assembly plant, and from department to department as much as, if not more than, between such contexts.

It is both interesting and problematic that little research in the communication field has addressed the problems (communication or otherwise) of managers in higher education. Even though most organizational communication research is conducted by individuals who are employed in higher education organizations, such scholars seem loath to look in their own back yards! Hence, even if the administration of an institution feels it is wise to appoint an organizational communication scholar to an administrative position (such as department chair), he or she is apt to know much more about managing a unit in a profit-making organization than about managing a unit in the type of institution in which he or she is appointed. Research drawn from the field of communication is distinctly limited in books dealing with management in higher education.[1]

Staton-Spicer and Spicer (1987), in their examination of the problems of academic managers, found that academic department chairs are among the least prepared of all managers. Hickson and Stacks (1991) have suggested that academic chairs are selected for a variety of reasons, none of which usually includes managerial abilities or expertise. If a person does something else well, he/she may be selected to manage a department, regardless whether that "something else" is relat-

ed to academic management or not. Hence, most department chairs enter the position with minimal qualifications and must develop their managerial skills primarily through experience, better known as "trial and error."

As a result, many universities utilize a number of in-house, on-the-job training programs. In many of these programs one or several books related to managing an academic department are used to guide these chairs in the process of developing their management skills. However, little in these books is devoted to communication problems. Given the dearth of organizational communication research relating directly to academic administration, this fact should not come as a surprise.

Since research in other organizational contexts indicates that many managerial problems in those contexts center on problems of communication, it is reasonable to believe that a significant number of similar problems exist in higher education as well. If so, it would appear that individuals within the communication field with a background in organizational communication and experience in academic administration should be able to assist other college and university administrators to learn how to identify and deal with the array of communication problems which may arise in their day-to-day lives as academic administrators.

Working from these assumptions, we established a series of workshops under the aegis of a southeastern university. The workshops centered on communication problems faced by chairs of academic departments. While we felt we knew some of the kinds of problems which most chairs must confront each year (both communication-based and not communication-based), we wanted to ensure the workshop

would cover the problem areas believed to be most significant by people actually holding the position of department chair. Hence, we sought data from such individuals (in advance of the workshops) to determine what problems should be considered. Since the data we obtained provide information which may be of value to others who wish to conduct similar workshops or to conduct organizational communication research in areas of significant importance to academic administrators, we present those data below.

Methodology

For this purpose, we developed a Likert-type instrument in which the respondents were to answer whether they strongly agreed (scored +2), agreed (+1), disagreed (-1), or strongly disagreed (-2) with a series of 29 statements about chairs in general. Each item was intended to reflect a possible problem for chairs. Each item was scored across respondents to determine the strength of its positive or negative weighting. The most positive possible score, therefore, was the number of respondents multiplied by 2 and the most negative possible scored was the number of respondents multiplied by -2. Since there were 47 respondents, the possible score range for each item was -94 to +94. However, the actual range observed was -25 to +54.

In order to obtain the data, letters were sent to the vice presidents for academic affairs of fifty universities in the southeast and midwest. These individuals were asked to recommend chairs for the workshops and have those whom they recommended complete the questionnaires. Thus, we did not control the actual selection of participants in the study. They were selected by the contact person at

their university. The final subject pool included 47 total respondents, 34 of which were male and 13 were female. Regarding their academic discipline, 15 were in the humanities and fine arts; 7 were in the social sciences; 6 were in business; 5 were in education; 5 were in mathematics and sciences; 4 were in engineering; 2 were in library science; one each was from continuing education, home economics, and medicine. Fifteen of the participants were from the state of Alabama; 8 were from Kentucky; 5 were from Missouri; 4 each were from Indiana and Mississippi; 3 each were from Arkansas, Illinois, and North Carolina; and one was from South Dakota. The range of experience of the chairpersons selected was from less than 1 to 33 years. Thus, while the sample was not selected by a truly random procedure, it did represent a very diverse group of department chairs.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 reports the responses to the 29 questions asked, beginning with those with the strongest agreement. The table also reports the numbers of respondents who chose each of the four options. Although it is clear the respondents as a group believe some of the items more clearly reflect real problems than do others, it is also that not all chairs face the same problems or, at least, see the same situations as problems.

The first two situations received the most agreement. Item one implies that chairs are burdened with communication overload. Item two indicates that chairs feel they have little control over their nonproductive faculty. These appear to be the two most important problems for chairs in this study. The first of these clearly is a problem stemming from perceived exces-

sive communication demands. The second is not a communication problem, per se, but many reflect the respondents' lack of confidence in their persuasion or leadership abilities. The next three problem areas all relate to communication problems, two involving conflict resolution and the other a concern with assertive communication or the communication of negative affect.

Problem area 6 involves faculty assessment, and does not appear on the surface to be a communication problem. However, it may not really be the assessment or evaluation of faculty which is the problem but actually the communication of those assessments to the faculty with the attendant potential for conflict. Problems 7 and 8 center on the image of the department and suggest a concern with the "public relations" aspect of the chair's role.

Overall, it appears that chairs have several serious communication concerns: 1) conflict management, 2) persuading/motivating others, 3) public relations, and 4) information management. While chairs confront many other problems which are not primarily rooted in communication (salary concerns, budget, and the like), many of the problems which appear to be most difficult for chairs to manage have strong communication components.

While communication should not be treated as the solution for all problems (the new elixer), communication scholars may have information and advice which can go a long way toward helping chairs to deal with some of the problems they face. It is important, however, that we direct sufficient applied communication research to these problems in higher education management to be certain that our theories based on research in other contexts may be validly applied in this critical context.

FOOTNOTE

1 An exception is the recently published book by Hickson and Stacks (1991). This book was written to overcome this shortcoming of earlier works. All of the chapters in this edited book are written by people from the field of communication.

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We may find that our research can actually   be used, by people just like us.

Table 1
PROBLEMS CONFRONTED BY DEPARTMENT CHAIRS--
RANKED BY DESCENDING SEVERITY

NUMBER	SCORE	PROBLEM (Followed by number of respondents for each option)
1.	+54	Most chairs feel they are overburdened with memos and/or meetings. 17-Strongly Agree; 22-Agree; 2-Disagree; 0-Strongly Disagree.
2.	+52	Most chairs do not know what to do with "dead wood" faculty. 16SA; 23A; 1D; 1SD.
3.	+36	Most chairs do not like being an arbiter between faculty members. 10SA; 25A; 9D;0SD.
4.	+31	Most chairs do not like being an arbiter between faculty and staff. 9SA; 23A; 10D; 0SD.
5.	+31	It is hard for most chairs to tell a faculty member, "No." 7SA; 27A; 9D; 1SD.
6.	+26	Most chairs find assessing faculty against one another quite difficult. 4SA; 27A; 9D; 1SD.
7.	+24	Most chairs have difficulty getting across to others (on campus) how good their departments are. 4SA; 27A; 11D; 0SD.
8.	+17	The central administration and chairs view the role of the chair's department in quite different ways. 5SA; 23A; 16D; 2SD.
9.	+17	Most chairs have difficulty deciding what information to keep and what to throw away. 5SA; 23A; 14D; 1SD.
10.	+16	Most chairs find it difficult being an arbiter between students and faculty. 5SA; 24A; 16D; 1SD.
11.	+15	Most chairs have difficulty getting across to others how important their departments are. 3SA; 26A; 15D; 1SD.
12.	+14	Chairs never seem to have time to do what they need to do personally and professionally. 11SA; 6A; 14D; 0SD.
13.	+12	Most chairs find it difficult determining what faculty want and need to know. 3SA; 23A; 14D; 1SD.
14.	+06	Explaining annual reviews to faculty is very difficult. 4SA; 18A; 18D; 1SD.
15.	+04	It is difficult to establish and maintain leadership with faculty. 2SA; 20A; 18D; 1SD.
16.	+01	Chairs have difficulty communicating with certain "support' groups on campus, especially ___. (answers to the blank: Faculty senate; affirmative action; student advisers; alumni; graduate students; tenure and promotions committees; alumni association). 2SA; 14A; 15D; 1SD.
17.	+01	Most chairs wish their faculty respected them more than they do. 1SA; 19A; 18D; 2SD.

Table 1 (continued)
PROBLEMS CONFRONTED BY DEPARTMENT CHAIRS—
RANKED BY DESCENDING SEVERITY

NUMBER	SCORE	PROBLEM (Followed by number of respondents for each option)
18.	-02	Most chairs need to know more about what their faculty members do with their time. 3SA; 18A; 16D; 5SD.
19.	-04	Most chairs wish they could respond better when the dean evaluates their performance. 1SA; 17A; 21D; 2SD.
20.	-07	Most chairs wish their faculties like them more than they do. 2SA; 14A; 21D; 2SD.
21.	-10	Most chairs feel that much of what they do has little to do with their jobs. 3SA; 12A; 24D; 2SD.
22.	-10	Most chairs feel they spend too much time repeating themselves to faculty. 2SA; 13A;0 26D; 1SD.
23.	-11	Chairs' superiors simply don't understand them at budget time. 4SA; 9A; 26D; 1SD.
24.	-11	Others (in my discipline) do not understand how good my department is. 1SA; 13A; 22D; 2SD.
25.	-11	Without more money, it is virtually impossible to motivate people. 5SA; 9A; 26D; 2SD.
26.	-16	Most chairs have trouble understanding what their upper-level administration wants them to do. 2SA; 12A; 24D; 24SD.
27.	-21	Departmental faculty simply cannot understand what is meant by a merit salary increase. 3SA; 9A; 24D; 6SD.
28.	-22	Most chairs feel they have little in common with chairs of other departments. 3SA; 6A; 24D; 5SD.
29.	-25	Evaluating young, new faculty is a different process. 3SA; 9A; 24D; 6SD.