

# *10 Strategies for University* **DEPARTMENT CHAIRS AND DEANS**

Dr. Rob McKenna

● WILD LEADERS

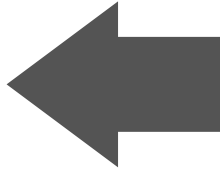


**BEING A DEPARTMENT CHAIR OR DEAN ON A UNIVERSITY CAMPUS IS ONE OF THE MOST CHALLENGING QUASI-MANAGEMENT JOBS IN THE WORLD.**

I describe it as quasi-management because most academics don't see the job as a management job, and yet, it has all the same attributes of any other leadership role without being felt as one. While the job looks different in many contexts, the reality is that being a leader of an academic department isn't something any of us prepared for, or in some cases, even desired. Nevertheless, these roles are some of the most important jobs on a university campus.

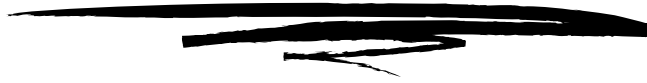
I spent 25 years in the role of department chair for both undergraduate and graduate programs on university campuses, and during that same time I was a leadership development consultant to all kinds of corporations, not-for-profits and universities attempting to develop leader capacity. What has fascinated me is how few of the universities I have consulted with see these roles as key leaders, or even department chairs and deans seeing themselves that way. When universities invest in developing leader capacity, it's usually focused on their staff and senior leaders - leaving department chairs and deans alone in their attempts to lead their faculty.

Following are ten strategies that I wish someone had passed on to me when I was just getting started leading an academic department. They aren't meant to oversimplify the role or the realities, but to provide encouragement that I hope will help you serve your faculty and students more effectively in the future - and also care for yourself.



## ① YOU ARE A LEADER:

While leadership is a set of skills. Leader is a position we occupy in position to others. It helps if we realize this early.



A mantra that my faculty heard so many times over the years was, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing in the curriculum."

I can't tell you how many times a faculty member suggested we do brown bag lunches. It seemed like a good idea, but it failed to draw faculty or students in the long run. The reality is that the fundamental economics of a university function around credit hours. If something is worth doing, it's worth doing in the curriculum.

You may not see yourself as a leader or a manager of people, but the reality is that you are. That feeling you have that you never wanted to be a leader and studied in a specific discipline to teach students is still true, but this job of being a chair or a dean is now about leading and inspiring your faculty so that they can inspire their students. Just like in business settings, becoming a leader doesn't necessarily get rewarded, but it is such an important role in the lives of others.


## CREDIT HOURS ARE CURRENCY:

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The economic engine in almost every university is the price students pay per credit hour.

### ③ LEVERAGE FACULTY STRENGTHS:

Each faculty member brings different strengths, motivations, and skill sets. Identify them early.



As a faculty member who is not the chair or dean, you get to argue with your colleagues. It's the nature of the beast. Sophisticated debate is one of the foundational pillars of academic life. That is true. But, for a department chair or dean responsible for making forward progress with their team, it's more complex than that. Over the years, I was always aware that one of my primary jobs was serving as a moderator and keeping the team intact emotionally and professionally. When I passed that role to successors I would always tell them, "Before you became a chair it was ok to make huge statements and bail out of the repercussions. As a department chair, your job at the end of the day will be to ensure that the team stays together in spite of their differences."

It's tempting to see faculty as simply defined by the disciplines in which they teach. The reality is that leading an academic department isn't that different from leading any other team. There is a temptation to see people through their technical or disciplinary skill or knowledge base. Faculty bring different temperaments, argue their points differently, and add value to an academic team in different ways. Seeing those unique strengths allows you to get the help you need to lead the department.

### MANAGE THE TEAM CONTEXT:

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One of your most important jobs is to manage how the team is working together. It is one thing to manage the work, but realize it's another skill to manage the emotional context of the team.

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## LEAD TOWARD RESULTS:

Faculty sometimes struggle with this, but as an academic department in today's world, we must be productive.

Gaining a bit of financial and measurement savvy is good for a department chair and dean. Identifying simple metrics that give you evidence you're on track isn't a bad thing, but most academics are repulsed by the idea. I'm not suggesting to make it all about the metrics, but establishing some goals as indicators of progress. Simple metrics like the number of students in programs, applicants to acceptance ratios, and even net financial return to the university are incredibly motivating. I always wanted to ensure that our programs were running "in the black", as they say in business - where there is a healthy financial margin of return to the university after covering costs. Even just a bit of financial savvy can serve a department chair and dean so well.

Adopting a "Kill three birds with one stone" strategy is so important. Or, as my colleague who had a beautiful bird always said, "Feed three birds with one scone." If we want to build academic departments that are not defined by a mentality of always needing more, we have to start by getting strategic and constantly thinking about creating solutions that make the work more impactful while being more lean.

## WORK LEAN:

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Only adopt new initiatives or programs that help faculty get more done with less time invested. If something is good for students, it must make the faculty job easier as well.

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## HIRE EMOTIONAL MATURITY AND SCHOLARSHIP:

So often we are tempted to hire top end scholars who seem to be nice people, but it is critical that we look for those who bring a high degree of emotional and interpersonal maturity. The stakes are too high not to do that.



I fully realize that it's difficult to imagine a faculty member thinking like an entrepreneur, but if they did just a little, it could make a huge difference. On some campuses, department chairs face a huge pressure to create new programs that will increase the revenue to the university. To think like an entrepreneur is to avoid the temptation to start with the revenue outcome, and instead to answer several questions. Think about your department and faculty and staff. Who are you and what unique skills do you have? What resources do you already have at your fingertips? Who do you know that might help (students, staff, community members, businesses, alumni)? And, what could you do with all of those things if you put them all together?

I have seen too many universities get themselves into trouble when they got enamored by a well published scholar who was a character mismatch for the university. That hire that took you six months to make may take years to undo. In order to create long term sustainability for a faculty team who will likely work together for years, we must prioritize adaptability and emotional maturity as much as anything. When you make that next faculty hire, ask yourself this. Will this person make everyone better and provide stability and composure to our team, or will they increase the emotional labor of team members?

## BE AN ENTREPRENEUR:

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Think about who you are, what you have, and who you know. What can you do with that?

## 9 INVEST IN TWO SUCCESSORS:

This may seem premature, but chairs and deans should be thinking about two others who could step into their roles if something happened to them.



If there is one thing I was so proud of regarding the academic teams I had the privilege of leading, it was that they all fought well. The reality is that academics fight, bicker and argue. It's a necessary part of the world we live in. But, they can fight well. They must fight through things to become better versions of themselves and to tackle complex challenges, but they must fight well in a posture of mutual respect. Reminding your faculty that they must fight well is a key message that encourages healthy discord without damaging relationships for the long haul.

Identifying leader capacity in your faculty is one of the most important jobs of a department chair, and we too rarely talk about it. Who are the two faculty members on your team who would be great department chairs when you move on. And, what are some of the skills you could help them develop now that would serve them when they are in your role?

## 10 MAINTAIN TEAM COHESION:

Teams that are effective work well together, are productive, and fight well. Our job is to help them remain cohesive while not avoiding the tough conversations.

Whether you find yourself in the role of department chair or dean for a year or two decades, my hope is that these ten strategies will encourage you. It's likely that you didn't seek the role, but you find yourself in that role as the leader of faculty and students regardless.

### **AN ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP ROLE IS A LEADERSHIP ROLE.**

I know that sounds obvious, but that means that it requires the development of a new set of skills that we so often skim over too quickly. I hope you will feel encouraged to lead strong and with a deeper sense of purpose regarding those for whom you are responsible.



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Named among the top 30 most influential I-O Psychologists, and featured in Forbes, Dr. Rob McKenna is the founder of WILD Leaders, Inc. and The WILD Foundation, and creator of the Whole and Intentional Leader Development Toolkit.

His TEDx Becoming a Whole Leader in a Broken World is a manifesto on the critical role that developing whole and intentional leaders will play in our future. Dr. McKenna has devoted his life to developing leaders and transforming the way we see the people in our organizations - seeing and developing them as whole.

Dr. McKenna's clients have included the Boeing Company, Microsoft, Heineken, Blue Origin, Alaska Airlines, Foster Farms, the U.S. government, and Children's Hospital. He previously served as chair and professor of a masters and PhD Industrial-Organizational Psychology program, and is the author of numerous articles and chapters on leadership character, calling, effectiveness, and leadership under pressure. His latest book, *Composed: The Heart and Science of Leading Under Pressure*, is a rigorous and practical guide to maintaining our composure and presence when it matters most. You can also see his most recent TEDx on this topic, *Whole Leaders Under Pressure*.