

## HEY JANE! –Leadership and Department Climate

Welcome to Column 28 of *Hey Jane!* This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions and answers are generated by the committee and SWS members.

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**HEY JANE! I'm a leader in my department, and it's quite clear that the 'climate' is not experienced as equally warm by all members. What can I do?**

JANE SAYS:

Whether you are formally serving as a leader (chair or associate or assistant chair) or have figured out that you are informally regarded as a leader, you have a variety of strategies to explore. We all know that context matters and that institutions and departments vary enormously, so *consider* these suggestions. Some may strike you as completely unsuitable, others might work with some tweaking, and a few may immediately make sense. There will be strategies you are already using or considering; it can be helpful just to get confirmation for what you are doing from an outsider. So please keep in mind, these strategies are offered as a menu of possibilities, not a twelve step program to be pursued.

“What can I do or do differently to improve the climate? I am keenly aware of the many limits to what I can accomplish, alone, as chair.”

JANE SAYS:

Improve communication within the department (there's always room...). Notice if you pass along some information casually, and add that information to formal communications that the whole department will receive. Use departmental distribution lists; set up and use a listserv. Set up a monthly lunch or coffee hour for the staff. Consider changing practices at meetings, such as initiating a rotation for speaking, or a change in seating arrangements. Communication requires more thought – e.g., acronyms, metaphors, or other “shorthand” based on shared experiences should not be relied on to effectively communicate. The potential for offending unintentionally may slow down our communications.

Ensure that the work of all department members is acknowledged and valued. Create a matrix of all service performed on behalf of the department. Note who does what, and keep that in mind as new and renewed assignments are made.

Be equitable in the distribution of professional development opportunities, using the same matrix. Note the opportunities you have some control over, such as funding external opportunities, or assignments with high visibility or high skill-development and/or networking potential. If they are not equitably assigned, consider how to equalize them.

Take the time for discussion and democratic decision making. For example, to rotate committee memberships entails more learning than to keep memberships unchanged.

Remember to reach out to junior or newer colleagues. When someone suggests we come over for dinner but doesn't suggest a particular date, we don't take it as a real invitation. Instead of telling someone you'd like to go for coffee some time, or suggesting that s/he drop in, you should have a handy list of people's office hours and make a point of dropping in yourself. If you are in a formal leadership position, you might want to set up a regular time for conversation. Newer colleagues are sometimes concerned that they will be bothering a senior colleague with a question or concern that isn't serious enough to warrant interrupting important work.

Dealing with conflict within the group is discussed in this previous "Hey Jane" column:  
[http://www.socwomen.org/web/images/stories/members/hey\\_jane/heyjane\\_vol14.pdf](http://www.socwomen.org/web/images/stories/members/hey_jane/heyjane_vol14.pdf)

"Everyone gets along, but there are still people who seem to feel less fully part of the group. Is there anything that can be done?"

JANE SAYS:

Improving the climate is not only needed when there are truly unwelcoming individuals. We know that a pattern of many "micro inequities" can have a significant impact on people's experiences. Incidents that might seem trivial to people who rarely encounter them have a greater impact on those for whom they are common experiences. As you observe the dynamics at meetings, social events, and in the hallway, you may realize that some colleagues you've known for a while don't show the good will you believe they have. For example, folks may have their routines and may not initiate conversations with newcomers. Or they may use acronyms or locally meaningful shorthand at meetings without realizing that this practice isolates newer colleagues. If the topic of informal conversations over the department coffee pot (if one exists) always centers on professional or campus athletic events, some people (like me) feel like outsiders. Other conversationalists may limit their focus to family and child related topics. Not to say all topics should have universal appeal, but folks could benefit from a gentle observation about the need to diversify topics if the participation in the community is to be inclusive. If some people move from unthinkingly contributing to a colleague's self-perception as an "outsider within" to a more welcoming stance, a significant change might occur in the departmental atmosphere.

Find out why some department members don't participate in social or co-curricular events. For example, is there a repeated use of times or locations that do not work for some people, interfering with developing and maintaining collegiality?

Note, literally, what people say about their lives in the department, and review your notes. One departmental problem people from underrepresented groups report is a failure to take issues they raise seriously.

“I have one colleague who routinely does things to make \_\_\_\_ (colleagues of color/with disabilities/younger/new/LGBT/older/women) colleagues uncomfortable. What can I do?”

JANE SAYS:

If you are the head of your unit, you need to deal with a colleague who has an undeniably destructive impact on the environment. This is likely to be a major time drain, and it is important to turn to academic leadership (above you in the hierarchy) and peers in other units for information and support. If there is a toxic influence, you are justified in asking for a team approach. Don't be surprised if others prefer to ignore the problem, because it will be a time drain for them as well.

“I feel very underprepared for the variety of responsibilities that I have.”

JANE SAYS:

Remember, you are able to incentivize positive (and disincentivize negative) participation by colleagues, even if you have less control over resources than others perceive.

You can work to further develop your interpersonal and leadership skills, although you may not have been chosen for interpersonal and leadership abilities.

As you identify areas in departmental functioning that need strengthening, make use of resources that suggest strategies and tactics for strengthening these areas. For example, instead of asking junior faculty to tell you about work-life balance issues, learn about them from your peers, professional organizations, or ADVANCE project offices and websites.

Consider starting an informal “peer mentoring” group of department heads to pool insights and experiences.

You will find a useful discussion of mentoring in a previous “Hey Jane” column:  
[http://www.socwomen.org/web/images/stories/members/hey\\_jane/heyjane\\_vol06.pdf](http://www.socwomen.org/web/images/stories/members/hey_jane/heyjane_vol06.pdf)

“I'm not in a formal leadership position, but I enjoy contributing and I think I am particularly good at some leadership tasks. How should I decide what to take on and what to turn down?”

JANE SAYS:

Take care of yourself. If you are not in a formal leadership position, you are not receiving support (time, most notably) for the work you do for the department or program. Even if you might do something better than the chair or director, it is not your responsibility to do that job. For example, interceding with a destructive colleague is best done by someone with formal authority and some resources.

You will find a useful discussion of how and when to say no in this early “Hey Jane” column:  
[http://www.socwomen.org/web/images/stories/members/hey\\_jane/heyjane\\_vol02.pdf](http://www.socwomen.org/web/images/stories/members/hey_jane/heyjane_vol02.pdf)

FOR INSIGHTS INTO FEMINIST ADMINISTRATION, INCLUDING CLIMATE-RELATED WORK, SEE JUDITH A. HOWARD'S "Brightening 'The Dark Side': Reflections from a Feminist Administrator" in *Sex and Gender News Fall Edition October 2009*: 2-3. <http://mirror.asanet.org/sectionsexgend/news/oct09.pdf>