

Welcome to Column 14 of Hey Jane! This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions and answers are generated by the committee and SWS members. Answers are compiled from several anonymous sources. All columns are archived on our committee's page on the SWS website <http://www.socwomen.org/about/career.html>

Disclaimer: The author of this column responds to both hypothetical questions and specific questions posed by SWS members. The situations addressed in the column are typically NOT reflective of the author's own personal life or current professional status.

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HEY JANE!

"I am in a position where I occasionally have to help manage conflict between faculty members or between graduate students (or between faculty members and graduate students). Do you have any suggestions for dealing with these situations?"

JANE SAYS:

Chairs, deans, and other administrators (I'll just use the term administrators from now on) can set a tone and shape the environment of a department, college or university so that conflict is rare or absent. One step toward creating a conflict free (or conflict-lite) workplace is to be sure that policies, expectations, evaluation criteria and anything else one can imagine that might create conflict be written down *and* applied consistently. This does not have to be limited to "big" things such as tenure evaluation or parental leave policies, but can even include something like project collaboration between faculty and students, students and students or faculty and faculty – who's responsible for what, what is the time line of the project, who will be first author?

Even the most amazing administrators, if they stay in their positions long enough, will probably have to deal with conflict at some point. Many administrators would say that the issue of conflict management is one that takes up much more of their time than they ever anticipated. As sociologists, we have a bit of an advantage as administrators in that we (should) recognize that sometimes conflict is largely a result of individuals viewing issues based on their position within the university or department.

Administrators may want to consider equipping their faculty/staff with the tools to deal with conflict on their own by providing and encouraging attendance at workshops on conflict management. This way when a conflict arises, the parties may be able to work through it on their own. Examples of tools or strategies the parties might use include:

- * Rather than reacting immediately to a situation, step back, take a deep breath and reassess the situation calmly.
- * Articulate the cause of the conflict and how you want it resolved.
- * Listen to the other person's perspective on the cause of the conflict and how they want it resolved.

* Write down what you think is going on before you talk to the other person directly. This allows for time to relax and reassess and it also provides a record of the conflict. But, always address the issue face to face if possible.

* Stick to the issue(s) at hand rather than get sidetracked by past conflicts. And, no name-calling.

Sometimes conflict escalates and the parties (even those equipped with conflict management tools) cannot resolve it on their own. At this point, it would be wise to get a third party involved right away and allow a forum for expression of the conflict that is mediated by someone who does not have a vested interest in the outcome, but who is respected by both parties. As an administrator you will often be that person who is expected to mediate.

An administrator should be an advocate. As a chair, you should advocate for your department members. As a dean, you should advocate for your constituents. However, it is important that you do not just advocate for your friends, or for the subfields or departments you personally favor. Problems often occur when administrators use their power to adjudicate disputes in ways that exercise their own personal prejudices. Conflict and disputes should not be an opportunity to support your friends and punish your enemies. You should avoid taking sides in disputes and should treat both sides with respect. Both sides (all sides) deserve to be heard and their issues addressed in an impartial manner.

Upper-level administrators should avoid becoming the instrument of other people's biases. If you talk only to the chair, you have only one view of a department. You need to be aware of rifts or tensions within departments and not just rely on departmental administrators' interpretations of events/actions. It's more work, and involves getting to know your constituents, but it better informs your decision making. Decisions need to be seen in the historical context of the departments in which they occur. That means you need to understand the broader context of the decisions you make.

Administrators should strive for transparency in decision making. The reasons for their decisions should be clear and unambiguous. People can usually understand and accept decisions they are unhappy with if they feel the *process* whereby the decision was made was handled in a fair and equitable manner. People want to feel that they have a voice and that their voice is heard. It is also important to be truthful and straightforward, yet always compassionate.

Be creative in conflict resolution. If there are resources that don't stretch far enough at the moment, for example, a plan can be proposed that might allot those resources to one person in the near future and the other person in the further-off future. To use a concrete example, suppose a group of students/faculty has collaborated on a paper, pretty much contributing equally, and they can't agree who should be the first author. If we assume they will work on other projects collaboratively in the future (that is, if they can work out the current conflict) one solution to suggest would be to put in writing that first authorship will rotate successively around the group.

Some colleges and universities have conflict resolution centers staffed with mediators and/or ombudspersons who are neutral and who trained to assist both parties in telling their stories and having their perspectives understood. If your institution has such a center, it could be a useful resource for you as an administrator. If it does not and conflict seems to appear on your agenda more often than you would like, you might want to consider trying to establish a conflict resolution center on your campus. For a list of links to programs at several colleges and universities, see <http://www.colorado.edu/Ombuds/UCOA/olinks.html>

CAVEAT to all professional advice: Always check with your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, etc. to find out what the norms and expectations are in your institution. And consult with your professional mentors to determine what is most appropriate in your specific situation.

I hope this helps! Stay tuned for next month's question "I've just received a job offer – how do I negotiate?"

-- Jane

Do you have a question for Jane? E-mail it to lara-foley@utulsa.edu.