

Stanford University



Helping Faculty Members Sharpen Their Focus

Tomorrow's Academic Careers

Message Number: 1193

Assist the faculty member in pursuing opportunities that have multiple benefits. Are there scholarly projects that can also result in curricular innovations for your department or involve students in research? Are there creative service opportunities at your institution that could be developed into conference presentations? This type of two-for-one assignment can teach the faculty member to focus by clustering his or her time into a more manageable group of projects

Folks:

The posting below looks at advice to help unfocused faculty become more productive. Much of this advice can benefit the rest of us as well. It is chapter 23, Helping Faculty Members Sharpen Their Focus in the book, The Essential Department Chair: A Comprehensive Desk Reference, Second Edition, by Jeffrey L. Buller. Published by Jossey-Bass: A Wiley Imprint. One Montgomery Street, Suite 1200, San Francisco, CA 94104-4594 www.josseybass.com. Copyright © 2012 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Regards,

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UP NEXT: The Academic Dean: An Evolving Role in Fundraising

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----- 1,827 words -----

Helping Faculty Members Sharpen Their Focus

One of the most perplexing challenges for department chairs is how to mentor faculty members who are excellent in many ways but do not focus their energy or attention so as to achieve all that they are capable of accomplishing. Unfocused faculty members may exhibit these characteristics:

* They're always flustered, complaining about how much there is to be done and then seemingly rushing off to do it, although they rarely produce any substantive results from all of this frenzied activity. While most faculty members may tolerate (or possibly even thrive in) all the demands that academic life places on their time, the unfocused faculty member too frequently seems overwhelmed even by minor challenges.

* They give you critical information, such as self-evaluations, annual budget requests, and textbook orders only after the deadline or, at best, at the moment they are due. If on more than one occasion you find the same person's report slipped under your door late in the evening on the day you needed it or e-mailed to you only when you are printing your own summary report to the dean, this is a faculty member who could desperately use your mentoring skills.

* They receive evaluations on which students routinely say that these professors' courses did not "remain on track" or "lacked structure." Unfocused faculty members frequently carry a lack of focus or organization from their departmental behavior into their courses. When students repeatedly comment about "a general lack of organization" in someone's courses, you may find that this criticism corresponds rather well with the concerns you are sensing in other areas of this faculty member's performance.

Although it can be difficult to help habitually disorganized people achieve greater focus in their work, it's not an impossible task. The advice each faculty member needs will vary, of course, according to individual work habits and personal style, but there are some general guidelines that you should use in either a formal performance review or an informal conversation. In all cases, the faculty member may be more receptive to the advice if you mention that you have personally found these suggestions helpful as a way of better organizing your own time.

Set goals and deadlines in a timely manner.

Unfocused faculty members frequently feel compelled to work on whoever problem has just caught their attention. You can provide useful advice about how to set priorities according to the overall importance of a task and the date at which it must be complete.

Devote a certain amount of time each day to vital, ongoing work.

Guide the faculty member in setting aside a specific amount of time, perhaps an hour a day, for consistent work on his or her most important tasks. These tasks are likely to be the work that has the greatest significance for the discipline or that faculty member's professional development. Encourage the faculty member to find a time that can be devoted to work each day without interruption. The period set aside should not be during regular office hours, and the faculty member should not even answer the phone or read e-mail during that period unless it is likely to be an emergency.

Don't overcommit or underestimate the amount of time that commitments will require.

A frequent challenge of unfocused faculty members is taking on too many obligations or assuming that they can complete a task in far less time than it ends up requiring. Encourage the faculty member to say no to low-priority tasks (such as service opportunities that occupy a great deal of time with minimal benefit for either the discipline or the faculty member) and to develop the habit of budgeting worst-case schedules rather than being overly optimistic. Have the faculty member limit the number of meetings and appointments to a realistic number on any given day. Always leave room in the person's schedule for emergencies and sudden changes that cannot be anticipated. Never overfill a day.

Track your use of time.

Ask the faculty member to keep a time log that records how his or her time is being spent each day, and then group these blocks of time into various categories. Work together with the faculty member to explore ways in which certain tasks can be done more efficiently or discarded entirely in favor of more productive activities. If the faculty member's appointments and meetings tend to go overtime, ask him or her to consider why this occurs: Does the person who is conducting the meeting focus on its primary purpose immediately, or does it take some time to get to the main topic? Do people tend to linger and talk long after the main purpose for the meeting has been completed? If you observe that the faculty member frequently seems rushed when trying to keep appointments, help this person analyze his or her use of time and determine how long each appointment actually runs. Go over these results with the faculty member, and together try to develop a more realistic estimate for how long should be blocked out for these appointments in the future.

Requiring unfocused faculty member to maintain elaborate time logs can be counterproductive.

The time they spend filling out the log could be better spent elsewhere. To avoid this problem, simplify the time log as much as possible. Create a spreadsheet in which the rows break the workday into ten- or fifteen-minute blocks. Label the columns according to major responsibilities, such as e-mail, teaching, appointment, committee meeting, data collection, and research writing. Then it becomes quick and easy for the faculty member to check off what he or she is doing during each block of time.

Set time limits for certain tasks.

Unfocused faculty members tend to be perfectionists at tasks that do not require perfection. Explain to the faculty member the difference between a major report to an accrediting body that should be as flawless as possible and ordinary e-mail messages that do not need to be proofread until they are free of every typographical error. Explain to the faculty member that not every e-mail message may be worth answering and that the vast majority of these messages can be answered in a sentence or two at most. Also, be sure to explain that it is perfectly acceptable to work on minor tasks for a set amount of time and move on to something else when that time is up.

Leverage your time.

Assist the faculty member in pursuing opportunities that have multiple benefits. Are there scholarly projects that can also result in curricular innovations for your department or involve students in research? Are there creative service opportunities at your institution that could be developed into conference presentations? This type of two-for-one assignment can teach the faculty member to focus by clustering his or her time into a more manageable group of projects.

Take advantage of to-do lists, but don't become overly dependent on them.

Establishing a clear list of items that need to be done can be useful for setting priorities. All too often, however, people become enslaved to their own to-do lists because the lists serve as unwelcome reminders of all the things they will never get done. Three guidelines can help make these lists truly productive:

1. Never record any item too large to be accomplished in a single session. Any item that is too large to be finished in one day should be broken down into multiple tasks that can be accomplished in one day each. Checking off these items as they are completed will provide the faculty member with a greater sense of accomplishment and will keep him or her from being overwhelmed by the size of the tasks on the list.
2. An item that has remained on the to-do list for more than a few weeks should be removed from it. Any item that gets carried over from list to list for several weeks is unlikely to be completed. Encourage the faculty member to refocus his or her priorities on tasks that can and will be accomplished rather than being tyrannized by these items.
3. At the end of each day, spend no more than ten minutes reorganizing the list for the next day's priorities. A small amount of time spent on setting priorities can become a useful exercise in focusing one's energy. Too much time spent on this task, however, becomes one more unnecessary distraction.

"Fake it until you make it."

Faculty members may be surprised how much more productive they can be simply by changing their attitude and approach. The next time they are tempted to complain about how much they still have to do, encourage them to speak instead about whatever it is they have just completed. After doing this a number of times, the faculty member will begin to feel that he or she is getting a lot done. Before long, he or she will have many more formerly overwhelming responsibilities well in hand.

In an initial conversation, it is frequently best to tell the faculty member that you are offering these suggestions only in a spirit of being helpful. If, in making these suggestions, you appear to be too intimidating at first, your advice may come across as simply one more thing to do rather than an approach that will ease the faculty member's workload. Be sure, too, to address one or two aspects of the faculty member's performance that seem meritorious. By acting in this way, you will be perceived as a true mentor who is trying to make good work even better, rather than as a mere supervisor who is offering criticism for its own sake.

Some mentoring challenges are best addressed in a single, highly focused session, followed by reviews of progress that occur no more frequently than once every term or even once a year. But mentoring unfocused faculty members isn't like that. The goal in these situations is to retrain an entire mind-set and a large group of daily habits, and it will require frequent intervention. You may have to touch base with the faculty member several times a day initially in order to make sure that progress is being made. Even after these initial efforts, it may be necessary to check in with the person at least once a day for many months.

Some chairs resist this idea, thinking that it seems to be nagging a colleague who is, after all, an adult and not part of the chair's official duties anyway. Nevertheless, for a department to succeed, as many members of the department as possible should be productive in their teaching, scholarship, and service. Mentoring or coaching an unfocused faculty member certainly involves a large personal commitment of time and energy, and it may well be met with resistance from the very person you're trying to help. But in the end, it is in the best interests of the faculty member, your department, and your own career as an academic leader.

RESOURCES

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