



Assuming Leadership of a Dysfunctional Unit - Quick Tips

When problems undermine a university unit's ability to fulfill its mission, or expose an institution to liabilities, one option regularly exercised is to recruit a new leader from outside the institution to provide new direction. If you applied (or accepted a nomination) in such a situation, and were selected, you now face the reality of leading this potentially troubled unit. The following thoughts offer some perspectives on how to set priorities to achieve positive change.

Start with a Thorough Grounding in How Vibrant Units Perform

Functional units not only fulfill their academic mission with a commitment to quality across their missions through shared governance, their culture includes an ethos of trust and respect, free from inappropriate external influences. They generally have strong leadership with high levels of integrity, characterized by clear communication, transparency, planning, and shared decision-making. The critical capabilities of a healthy, fully functional unit are fourfold. It should:

- Execute a robust curriculum through high-quality instruction that enrolls an appropriate number of students;
- Conduct scholarship meeting institutional standards that is widely published and impactful;
- Encourage individual faculty to contribute to the institutional mission through service to the university, the profession and society;
- Do all of this in a collegial and mutually supportive atmosphere that is ethically, legally, and fiscally responsible.

Triage the Situation

Undoubtedly, you have been provided perspectives from colleagues and others familiar with the unit. Inevitably, some of these will be biased and some of your efforts may be in vain unless you have an accurate understanding of the issues.

- Meet with individual faculty members, staff, students, stakeholders and more senior administrators. Ask three questions
 - What are your personal goals?
 - What are the goals for the unit?
 - What are the impediments to achieving these goals?
- Set a goal to achieve this in a timely manner and stick with it.
- Listen attentively, take notes--avoid any evaluative comments; you are building as broad a picture as possible before anything else.
- Do not make premature assessments or decisions. Keep your own counsel while you are gathering information. Take a week to reflect on what you have heard and set action priorities in three categories, across each area in which action is needed to achieve improvement in the unit's core capabilities:
 - Immediate action
 - Things to be done over the next two to four months
 - Actions to be taken at some future time





- Fill out the Academic Unit Diagnostic Tool (AUDiT) (link will be added) and reflect on your interviews and your own assessment from that exercise. Consider especially any themes that emerge and "hot spot" cells on the AUDiT dashboard.

Imagine Success

What will look different if you succeed in helping the unit move in a new direction and regain (or achieve) vibrancy? What will be happening? What will not be happening? Use the AUDiT to focus on one or two key areas in which change would be especially valuable.

- Define some metrics in each critical area: how will you measure success?
- Set milestones, including first steps, intermediate achievements, and long-term goals.
- In each area, identify key stakeholders, opinion leaders, and gatekeepers.
- Identify barriers to success: are they financial, interpersonal, structural, governance, political, etc?
- Reflect on themes from your internal conversations and incorporate as much of the ways in which members of the unit talk about their issues and goals as possible: if there are common words, phrases, or descriptors that recur, incorporate them into your vocabulary. Using familiar words and concepts will increase comprehension, retention, and buy-in as you embark on your efforts.

Develop a Plan of Action

Develop a draft that articulates your vision, your ideas for action, and steps going forward.

- This is only a draft. Do not disseminate this as your department's PLAN going forward.
- Consider separating your assessment section from the vision section and the success metrics; different sections may be appropriate for different audiences and purposes.

Test Drive Your Ideas

- Consult with at least one wise, somewhat removed advisor who can and will provide confidential, objective feedback and raise questions for your consideration.
- Consider approaches adopted by other leaders with similarly challenged units.
- Share your initial concept of success and action priorities with the institutional officer to whom you report.
- Take your assessment and ideas for success to a consultative body within the unit if a functional one exists: an executive committee or advisory group of the full professors, etc.
- Test drive the themes in conversations within the unit, with carefully selected individuals considering the following:
 - Who are the key influencers in the unit? Often these are not the most vocal or proactive.
 - Who are those most likely to summarily dismiss your ideas with populist arguments? Disarm them through engagement and sincere openness to their ideas, allowing the fallacy of their arguments to become obvious while being willing to accept ideas that have merit.





Identify with the Unit and Institution

- Talk about things “we” can do together, not things “I” am going to accomplish. Strenuously avoid inclination to use the pronoun “I”
- Avoid criticism of the previous administration.
- Do not import a plan from a previous institution or department and impose it on your new unit.
- Do not compare your new academic home negatively to previous places you have been. Avoid saying “we did it this way at my previous institution.”

Avoid Political Deals

e.g. *“you support my plan and I’ll provide travel money to the [X] meeting”*

- Outstanding units are built on motivation, not deals.
- Political approaches inevitably lead to winners and losers and that to distrust, dysfunctionality and, ultimately a search for a new leader.

