The Challenge of Working Together

Much has been written about the "faculty-staff divide", about faculty distress over the "corporatization of the Academy" and administrators' frustrations with faculty who won't "follow the rules." Is there no hope? We're all intelligent people working for the same institution. Can't we just live together in peace?? Every once in awhile a story appears about a breakthrough in understanding of "the other," but even so we keep perpetuating, and complaining about, our differences.

When I began work as an organization development consultant at MIT, I heard stories about this "divide." I had worked in a variety of other industries and organizations and every one of them had its own version of this cultural split. I had experience establishing credibility with people up, down, and across the organizational hierarchy. While I knew, of course, that faculty and administrators would have different needs and interests, I was confident I could be of service to both. But it took me a couple of years to identify and appreciate this particular set of differences.

Over the years, I have come to understand that each group has a very different perspective on the world. They are motivated by and rewarded for different things. While both are, at core, dedicated to doing what they believe is right for the institution and for the education of students, they often have very different ideas about what "right" is and about how to get there. While these differences can create tensions, they also serve as "checks and balances" that sustain our institutions.

The Characters

I have had the opportunity to witness the dynamics when these different perspectives come together and have developed an appreciation for the inherent tensions between these cultures. Here are two individuals I've met:

The Professor identified her passion for her discipline relatively early in life. A curiosity, a questioning, an intense interest led to her commitment to making a contribution to her field. Lots of schooling, study, research and writing culminated in the successful defense of a dissertation and a seemingly endless trip along the tenure track. Now a tenured professor, she is a part of a global community of scholars, has enviable job security, and is committed to sharing what she has learned with the next generation.

She dresses casually most days; she attends 3 or 4 international conferences per year; she does much of her writing late at night at home and, aside from scheduled office hours, does not always come to campus on days when she isn't teaching. Her closest colleagues, who include former students, are scattered around the world.

In contrast, the Administrator did not begin his career in academia. His career ladder began with an interesting job a couple of years after college. He earned an MBA and has worked in several companies in different industries. He takes pride in his department's accomplishments and in adapting successful business strategies from one organization to another. He is committed to the professional development of his staff and, while pleased to be in academia, isn't sure if this is where he will stay throughout his career.

He wears a suit to work most days; gets 4 weeks vacation; and is in the office at least from 8am to 6pm most weekdays. He is an active member of one or two professional associations and has good working relationships with the heads of the other central administrative departments.

These two represent major constituencies within our universities. Of course, there are several other cultural profiles: the Student Affairs officer who, often in response to her own undergraduate experience, is passionately committed to the development of well-rounded students; the Administrative Officer in an academic department who must, by definition, manage the tensions between the two dominant cultures; and numerous others. However, it is the academic and the administrative cultures that drive much of what we experience, and the lessons we learn from them can be applied elsewhere.

The Challenges

Here are just two examples that illustrate the challenges we face when these cultures come together:

The Academic culture thrives on innovation. The goal of faculty is to create or discover knowledge and to apply existing knowledge to new problems. Whether teaching or doing research, faculty are looking for new approaches. An individual faculty member does not need to know how things are done in an adjoining classroom or lab as long as he or she has the flexibility to do whatever it takes to accomplish his/her mission.

The Administrative culture, on the other hand, promotes standardization. For an organization as complex as a university to run effectively, there must be uniform policies and procedures, and rules regarding the use of resources. As stewards of these resources, Administrators are accountable to Boards and funders, and responsible for regulator and legal compliance. Administrators are also looking out for the best interest of the individual non-faculty staff who, while hired to work within a particular department, is an employee of the university and subject to the same rights and responsibilities as all other staff.

These difference lead, classically, to the tension we may experience when developing a new policy or implementing a new technology university-wide. The Professor understandably wants the policy or technology to be applied in a way that does not interfere with her freedom to work however she thinks is best. And the Administrator implementing a change wants it to apply equitably across the organization.

Perhaps the most dramatic difference is regarding the posture towards conflict.

The Academic culture, which values innovation and consensus, lends itself to the creative use of conflict. If we disagree with each other, maybe there is something we can learn. And if I believe I am right, I should do all I can to share my views and influence the outcome. It's not personal. In a stereotypical academic meeting, the conversation flows with the ideas in the room. Ideas are surfaced, challenged, built upon, rejected, renewed. No clear decision may be made or there may be a significant breakthrough.

The Administrative culture, which values appropriate standardization and respects hierarchy, has a tendency to avoid public conflict. It is often not productive for me to disagree publicly; if I have a different view, I'll voice it through the appropriate channels. In a stereotypical administrative staff meeting, conversation is cordial, pre-prepared information is shared, and items which come up which are not on the agenda might be held over for a future meeting.

Coming Together

So what happens when faculty and administrators come together? I have seen faculty argue vigorously about what direction a program should take and then swap family news, and I've seen administrators squirm with discomfort at the scene. When these behaviors gets played out, faculty think the apparently unopinionated administrators have nothing to offer and administrators think the seemingly argumentative faculty are. . . nuts.

Assuming you recognize some of the above, so what? Should we do anything about this?

I would contend that, particularly at this moment in the life cycle of higher education, when our stereotypical slow pace of change is dramatically out of sync with our environment, we are, at the very least, wasting precious time and energy "managing" rather than taking advantage of the differences in our perspectives. And organizations which do not find ways to value the contributions of all end up losing their most valuable contributors.

So what can we do? Here are some possibilities:

First, we can acknowledge and honor our differences, rather than ignoring or fighting against them. As suggested above, these tensions should be recognized as "checks and balances." Unchecked innovation, decentralized decision-making and

excessive conflict will tear the organization apart while standardization for its own sake, hierarchical decision-making, and conflict avoidance will drain the life out of it. We have different roles to play and neither exists without the other.

One lesson for Administrators is to "Speak up." Faculty are not mind readers and the conflict avoidance described above is translated into lack of value added. In my experience, I have gained the respect and collaboration of faculty much easier and quicker when I have been clear and vocal about my views.

One lesson for Faculty is to "Ask and then listen." While it's true that many administrators could be performing the same functions elsewhere, they have chosen to work in higher education and it is not for the money. Administrators are dedicated to the long term sustainability of the university and, therefore, it is in the faculty's best interest to hear what they have to offer.

And there is a corollary lesson for all, faculty, administrators, student affairs staff, academic administrators, and others: "Step up and step out". Putting one's own contribution in the context of the overall mission of the university can create a whole new level of energy, creativity, and commitment. There is a synergy that is created when members of each culture step out, view the larger enterprise and collaborate across silos.

I have had the privilege of working on a number of projects and committees that bring together faculty and administrators (and, in many cases, students) to work on issues of importance to the Institute. Whether the topic is race relations, or work/life balance, or how to respond to an international crisis, we have an opportunity to get to know each other both in the context of and aside from our institutional roles. I have seen the positive impact such collaboration has had on me and others, and I urge those who wish to productively explore these creative tensions to find similar opportunities.