

Random Thoughts . . .

PROBLEMS WITH FACES

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The difference between me and upper-level administrators is that most of my problems have faces.

(Unknown department head)

I have a pretty good sense of what kind of jobs I'm suited for, and department head is definitely not on the list. I don't have the salesmanship, patience, or tact to do what successful heads do, so I've always declined requests to become a candidate for a vacant headship. It's arguably the most important position in the university, though, and I was starting to think that avoiding it might be selfish, so when I got another invitation I strolled over to consult my department head friend Jess Frobish. He was on the phone, so I waited at the door.

Frobish: *Hi, Sally—Frobish here...fine, couldn't possibly be better. Yes, I know the Dean is eagerly waiting for my contribution to his latest benchmarking study—I'm on it... Is he in?...ok, when he's available could you please ask him to call me about this new opportunity hire the Provost just authorized—I've got someone who would be...eight of the other nine heads already called about it?...but the Provost's memo came out only an hour ago—ok, just tell him I'd like to talk to him...you have a lovely day too. C'mon in, Rich—what can I do for you?*

Me: I've been invited to apply for the ChemE headship at Mishugass U. and wanted to get some advice. Got a minute?

F: Sure, but expect interruptions—my secretary is out with another migraine and I'm holding the fort here myself.

M: Sorry to hear that—so, I was thinking (phone rings).

F: Excuse me... *Hello?...Oh, hi Charlie—how's it going?... yes, I'm aware that the letter of support on your NSF proposal is due Wednesday—I'll get it to you...no, no word from Physical Plant yet...I know your fume hood broke down yesterday and the lab smells like a chicken farm in July—we've called them twice and they say they're on it...*

look, you know how they are, and calling them again will just irritate...come on, Charlie, complaining to OSHA will just guarantee that you'll be drawing your pension before Physical Plant ever sets foot in your lab...ok, ok, I'll call them again..., and meanwhile, try getting a can of air freshener and see if it...look, doing that with a can of air freshener is physically impossible, and...hello...hello... OK, back with you, Rich. What were we talking about?

M: Being a head...I'm just not sure I'm right for the job, and (knock on the door)

F: Just a sec...*Come in.* (A student enters.) *Hello, Eugene—what's up?*

Eugene: *It's about Professor Farblunget—I have a petition here signed by 36 of the 45 students in 338 this semester asking you to remove him as the instructor.*

F: (Scans the petition) *Not much detail here—what's the problem?*

E: *Where to begin...every day he comes in late, mumbles incoherently all period, and runs overtime; last week he gave a midterm mostly on stuff we've never seen and the average grade was 34 and he said we're idiots; he called Emily a bimbo when she asked him a question, he...*

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F: *OK, I get the picture...I'll have a talk with him and hear his side of the story, and I'll see if we can...*

E: *With due respect, Dr. Frobish, we're prepared to go to the Dean with this, and if that doesn't work we'll get the word out to the local press that incompetent teachers are tolerated as long as they bring in enough research money...*

F: *Look, Eugene, that won't be necessary...I'm going to do everything I can to resolve the situation...I'm just asking you to give me a chance to do it before you go ballistic.*

E: *Fair enough, sir—thank you.*

F: *You're welcome.* (The student leaves, and Frobish jots down some notes.) OK, where were we?

S: The department head position?

F: Right, right—well the thing is (phone) *Hello...ah, good morning, George, thanks for returning my call...fine, thanks...George, we're truly grateful for the generous support your company has given us over the years...as we discussed last month we're trying to raise 15 million dollars to renovate this antique building we're in and we thought that perhaps you could...oh, really?...the Chancellor has asked the company to donate exclusively through the University Foundation, but you think you could sponsor a student chapter lunch...I see...well, I wonder if we...ok, take care...bye.*

M: That didn't look like much fun.

F: Last time I spoke to them they were making noises in the 3–4 million range, and now it's pizza and cokes...Now, you're wondering whether you should become a department head...well all I can tell you is (phone)...sorry, it never ends...*Hello...oh hi Sharon, how are you?* (whispering)...got to take this, Rich, it's our superstar associate professor who got into the National Academy this year...*oh, I can't complain...what can I do for you?...what?...an offer from Cal Tech?...I didn't know you were talking to them...so, what's their offer?...tenured full professor...your own secretary and office suite...your own parking space...and a salary of WHAT???...that's very impressive...ok, you know we've had budget cuts for the last four years, so I don't know if we can come close to matching that, but I'd like to try...I see...they were in a hurry for a decision and you were sure we wouldn't be able to match it so you accepted...well, I guess there's nothing more to say except congratulations and best of luck...right...bye.*

M: I'm guessing this isn't your best day.

F: Good guess...and you haven't heard it all—I had a student complaining that a TA hit on her, a mother upset about her

son's grades threatening to complain to her cousin the state senator, and another industrial supporter bailing because of the economy, and that was all before 10 a.m. ...and then...

M: You know what, Jess—I think maybe I've got the answer to my question. I have another one, though—why do you keep on doing it? Just being a professor and doing my research and teaching my courses is looking really good to me right now—this nice corner office and a salary boost can't possibly be worth these headaches.

F: I feel that way a lot, but then I think about the other side of the coin...for instance, you know we've brought in three of the biggest senior research stars in the country in the last five years? I recruited all of them. Half of the new research building allocated to us and fully outfitted with labs and offices? The twenty million I raised in my first five years made that happen. The 10 fantastic assistant professors we've hired since I became head who are setting records in research and also winning teaching awards—and the fact that we've held on to all...to all but one of them despite four years of no raises? The mentoring program I created may have something to do with that. And while I think national department rankings are generally worthless, the fact that ours has gone from nowhere to top 15 and climbing makes me feel like I'm doing something worthwhile.

M: No doubt about that, but...

F: The thing is, an effective head can do great things for a department's faculty and students and a bad one can make things miserable for everyone. After nine years I'm about ready to pass the torch, but I don't think we'd have a chance of getting an external search authorized in this economy and until I see someone internal who can do the job right and is willing to step up to it, I'll keep hanging around.

M: Understood, and I applaud you...however, I'm more convinced than ever that after a month in that job either my faculty would kill me or I'd kill myself, so no Mishugass for me! Ciao, Jess, and thanks.* □

* *Note:* This column started out to be a whimsical chronicle of the headaches department heads have to deal with, and then it took an unexpected turn and I found myself seriously contemplating everything they have to do and the range of skills and qualities they need to do it well. That conversation is fictitious, but the situation isn't. I wouldn't go so far as to wear an "I ♥ my Head" (or Chair) tee shirt to work, but if yours is doing a good job, a few words of appreciation would not be out of place.

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