

Managing Faculty “Over-performance”

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Introduction

Whenever Department Chairs get together a very common topic – often one of the first – is how to manage challenging faculty. Usually these are defined as “difficult” colleagues, due to their poor interpersonal behaviours, their chronic under-performance, and some who habitually fail to follow important processes and procedures (Chu, 2011). However, another class of challenging staff, often overlooked, are what I term the “over-performers” – those whose surface performance seems exemplary and often highly commendable e.g. excellent teaching evaluations, very significant high repute publications, excellent grant and engagement track records, and in one or sometimes more areas, greatly exceeding expectations for rank and seniority. This apparent surface over-performance may come at considerable personal and Departmental cost – poor work-life balance, deteriorating personal and professional relationships, under-performance in other areas, and cutting of corners. It may indeed be contributing to chronic physical and mental health issues via burn-out, with potentially very severe professional and personal impact.

Symptoms

Some of the warning signals for the Department Chair to look out for are pretty obvious. I have managed several staff who always seemed to be in their office – whenever I arrived early and whenever I left late. They had a reputation of putting in enormous numbers of hours at work and on work at home. Some had young families and spouses with many commitments of their own. Students and colleagues knew they could be found at virtually all hours of the day or night in their office or in the lab. Post-graduate students in particular took full advantage of this. Many were also contactable at all hours via mobile phone and proudly advertised this off their personal web pages. Further clear indicators of unwillingness – or inability – to leave the lab and office include emails sent at strange hours of the night and weekends. A couple of colleagues I recall being well known for their regular 3am very long emails. There simply were not enough hours in a day for them to contribute to anything much outside their work. The occasional indirect – or direct – complaint from their partners about their unavailability for out of work commitments was very telling about the broader impact of their all-consuming work habits.

Given staff are generally employed on contracts stipulating broadly expected numbers of hours on work, at least in New Zealand and Australia where I have been Department Chairperson, producing amounts of work that very clearly can not be performed in anything close to these supposed norms is another tell-tale sign. For example, the staff member with one or two post-graduate students but who produces 3-4 times the number of publications expected of staff at their rank indicates either exceptional genius and productivity or large amounts of overwork (or sometimes the more worrying taking of various short-cuts). Students remarking on how accessible the staff member is on teaching evaluations are pleasant to read, until one notes that they must be going well beyond the call of duty of time spent (and sometimes excessive assistance being given, to the students’ – and staff - ultimate detriment).

Over-commitment in many areas is common in over-performers. While this might be sustained for a short time, overly long hours, corner-cutting, dumping on colleagues or students, and worse are potential consequences.

A final sign I watch for is problematic interpersonal dynamics, both on the work front and in personal life. Over-performers usually have one or more areas that the “over-“ is compensated by the “under-“, disadvantaging and often angering colleagues and students. While I’m not a great fan of tea-room gossip,

I've found it often highlights areas of concern very quickly in regards to spotting an over-performing colleague.

Implications

We could just ignore these signs and assume a person is a high achiever and their over-performance benefits the department, the university and their career. But the problem is it usually doesn't, on all three fronts. Eventual burn-out is the usual result in my experience, along with personal relationship discord and often destruction. Increased stress, mental health issues and physical health issues are all very serious and likely problems from excessive hours and effort on ones job.

Inconsistent performance is a likely result of focusing on trying to achieve well beyond reasonable expectations in one or more areas. Time limitations alone would suggest that other areas of one's work, and personal life, would have to suffer. Alternatively, and perhaps more damaging, colleagues will be pressed upon indirectly or directly to pick up the slack in areas of low priority to the over-performer. A classic example in my experience is the research "star" underperforming – often significantly - in service, student counselling and teaching, while winning more than their share of grants and publishing extensively. Colleagues and students tend to get very angry – with just cause – when they either suffer from lack of attention or have to pick up the slack for the "over-performing" colleague. If the promotions and/or tenure process inadvertently seem to support this selfish focus, then Department morale is severely affected.

Very serious consequences can come from corner-cutting, exploitation and unethical behaviours, in an attempt by the over-performer to maintain or even increase their over-performance. I have been forced to intercede in PhD supervisory relationships where the poor PhD student has become a "paper machine" for an errant supervisor trying to create an exceptional publication record. Similarly, I have unfortunately had to pick up the pieces of important procedures, including Health and Safety, not being adhered to or carried out properly by over-performers in order to minimise "unproductive" work. We have heard of increasing instances of fraud, including plagiarism, self-plagiarism, idea theft, and falsification of data. I believe that one driver has been the setting of unrealistic expectations and attempts to meet these by some over-performers.

The creation of a set of unrealistic expectations in the workplace is an additional serious problem for the Chair. We write Faculty performance expectations as part of tenure, promotion, review and raise calculation processes for good reasons – to guide and support colleagues as they make their way through their academic careers. Individuals who massively exceed these expectations – usually in specific areas rather than others – may be high achievers who do deserve quicker advancement. However, over-performance on selective indicators due to massively excessive hours, corner cutting, unfulfilment of other duties, exploitation of students and colleagues, and damage to their health and relationships is not good for anyone, least of all the individual.

Ultimately the over-performer is likely to suffer from uncollegial working relationships, unsatisfied students, and an unhappy work and personal life. The Department hosting the over-performer will likely suffer poor morale and ultimately lower Departmental performance.

Management

How does the Department Chair address over-performance when the Chair themselves is very often under pressure from Deans and Provosts to improve overall Departmental performance? Firstly, identifying symptoms – either direct ones or indirect, such as impact on colleagues and students – gives one insight into the nature of the issue. In my experience the impact of straining for over-performance goes far beyond the individual and the root cause needs to be tackled. It is a very important duty of the Chair to detect, intercede and manage over-performance of colleagues. It just won't go away if ignored.

Meet with the staff member, either as part of their normal performance appraisal or to tackle a particularly symptomatic aspect of the problem. I usually tackle a symptom of the over-performance rather than an area of under-performance or impact on colleagues or students, unless the latter has become critical. I find it easier to begin the discussion noting e.g. the unusually large number of grants or papers, the unusually effusive student evaluation comments on all-hours availability, the unusually large number of favourable comments from industry collaborators etc. This can lead quickly to asking about work hours, accessibility, personal or work pressures, and leading into areas where there are problems stemming from the areas of over-performance.

Collaboratively setting realistic expectations including a set of appropriate targets and work behaviours is the only truly successful route out of the area. Just like in managing the converse of “under-performance”. Very often I have found the individual is thankful for the chance to discuss impacts of their areas of over-performance and discussing a “recalibration” with their Chair. Sometimes they do need to be alerted to concerns of colleagues and students e.g. complaints about poor quality work done in another area of their job. However, often I have found they are very aware of these issues and sometimes are trying to compensate. Ongoing tracking of performance to ensure it is within reasonable expectations in all areas is essential.

Sometimes things have progressed to a level that professional intervention is necessary, from other colleagues and health professionals. Serious under-performance in one area cannot be compensated for in another. Uncollegial and unethical behaviours cannot be allowed to continue and may require severe consequences.

Ultimately, as with many other parts of academic leadership, setting a good example as Chairs in terms of managing our own tendency to over-perform is critical (Buller, 2013). Chairs need to set realistic goals for themselves as well as their faculty. If reading this article has sounded all too familiar and one is recognising oneself just a little too much – please get assistance!

Summary

High performance in our jobs as faculty is acknowledged to be a laudable goal. We have always had underperformers, difficult behaviours and even unacceptable behaviours to deal with as Chairs. However, over-performance of some faculty seems to be growing increasingly common. Ultimately the impact on individuals, their families and our Departments make it just as unacceptable. We need to manage it as well as other performance issues. Occasionally, our own over-performance in different areas needs managing by self-reflection, or even by our Deans.

References

Buller, J. *Positive Academic Leadership: How to Stop Putting Out Fires and Start Making a Difference*, Jossey-Bass, 2013.

Chu, D. *The Department Chair Primer: What Chairs Need to Know and Do to Make a Difference*, Jossey-Bass, 2011.