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Pick Your Battles

Submitted by Sabine Hikel on April 12, 2010 - 3:00am

There is a whole lot of anger in the air lately! My inbox has been overflowing with messages from angry new faculty who are sick of departmental drama, tired of students' hostility, and who are so filled with anger that they can't focus on their research and writing. I'm not sure if all this pent-up anger is from unresolved conflicts that have been brewing all year or the result of cumulative devaluation in the workplace. Either way, it seems clear that we could use some straight talk about Common New Faculty Mistake #13: *Avoiding Conflict*.

Conflict is Inevitable

Academia is full of intellectual, interpersonal, political, and downright petty conflicts. While many new faculty members feel comfortable with intellectual conflicts, they struggle to effectively resolve everyday conflicts. Their discomfort in resolving conflict extends across a wide spectrum and includes people who have more power (senior colleagues and administrators) and people who have less power (students) within their institution. I believe this results directly from the fact that we all received extensive training in the art of substantive argumentation as part of our graduate research training, but few of us ever learned how to resolve other conflicts in ways that don't harm our relationships with others.

And, if you're an underrepresented faculty member, the dynamics of racism and sexism mean that, in addition to the common conflicts that new faculty members experience, you may also experience devaluation, disrespect, and daily aggression. Let me be perfectly clear: It's OK to feel angry when people behave badly (even if their behavior is unintentional). In my 10 years as a faculty member, I was routinely asked to make copies by people who assumed I was the department secretary, asked if I "*really* had a Ph.D." by students who couldn't imagine someone like me was a professor, and it was regularly assumed that I *worked for* Professor Rockquemore (instead of actually *being* Professor Rockquemore). Every time these types of incidents occurred, I felt *annoyed* that I wasn't getting the benefit of the doubt that my other colleagues received and *angry* that I live in a world where my presence requires continual explanation. Anger, annoyance, and frustration are normal responses to persistent sexism and racism in the workplace. In fact, if you receive subtle daily reminders that you're different and imply that you only belong in the ivory tower in a supporting role, then it's OK to feel mad about it.

The problem occurs when new faculty members (majority or minority) respond to conflicts in one of two extreme ways: 1) **fighting every battle** or 2) **avoiding conflict altogether**. The problem with fighting every battle is that you will quickly alienate yourself from everyone in your environment. The problem with avoiding conflict is that when you push anger down, it grows, deepens, and expands. This can put you at risk of publicly exploding when triggered by a minor incident, developing stress-related illness, and/or sucking up so much of your energy that you have none left for your intellectual work.

That said, expressing anger is tricky because we live in a world where there are precious few socially acceptable forms of communicating anger in the workplace (this is especially so for underrepresented faculty). Any expression of anger tends to be interpreted through the frames of race and gender. Even the smallest expression of anger from my Black male colleagues resulted in their being labeled as “threatening” or “unprofessional.” And for women, communicating frustration quickly got them labeled as "emotional," "out of control," and/or a "bitch."

Healthy Conflict

Conflict in your professional life is inevitable, so it's critically important for all of us to learn when and how to express our feelings in ways that are effective and professionally appropriate. If you are underrepresented, you’re likely to have more conflict AND to have your responses interpreted through particular frames, so you have to be extra skilled at conflict resolution. The good news is that learning how to engage in healthy conflict will allow you to express your feelings, retain your integrity, and minimize negative consequences to your professional relationships.

Here are the three questions I use when conflicts arise:

1. In this particular situation, should I push back or should I pull back?

2. What will I gain and what will I lose?

3. If I decide to push back, what's the most effective way to do so?

There are no right or wrong answers here. Sometimes pushing back makes sense; other times it's better to pull back and then go hit the punching bag at the gym. Either way, anger is energy so it has to come out of your body. In other words, don't confuse “pulling back” with “stuffing down”! Pulling back simply means releasing the angry energy in an indirect way because the costs of expressing it outweigh the benefits.

For the times when I decide to push back, my best trick is to use Marshall Rosenberg’s [1] formula:

1. State your observation of the problematic behavior.

2. Describe how it makes you feel.

3. Make your needs explicit.

4. Clearly request what you want.

For example, during my last week as a faculty member, someone came to my door and said, "Excuse me, I'm looking for Professor Rockquemore. Do you know where she is?" Despite my name on the door and the fact that I was the only person sitting in the room, my visitor must have had a synaptic misfire that disallowed these two pieces of data to result in the common-sense conclusion that I am Professor Rockquemore. This happens frequently and most of the time I decide it's not worth pushing back. Typically, I pull back, smile, and say "I'm Professor Rockquemore, what do you need?" But not that day! I was tired, cranky, and just sick of having to explain myself to others. I decided I had nothing to lose and much to gain by pushing back. My first impulse was to throw my stapler at the person's head, but instead I breathed deeply, paused, and asked myself: What is the most effective way to push back?

I chose to say:

"When I'm the only person sitting in this office and you ask me ‘Where is Professor Rockquemore?’ it makes me feel frustrated that you've looked at me and assumed I couldn't be that person. It also makes me feel angry that I live in a world where I have to keep explaining to people that I'm really a

professor. Professors come in lots of different packages, so I just want to encourage you to rethink your assumptions about the type of people who fill that role. Now, how can I help you?"

This was a simple two-minute exchange, but I'm sharing it to make the point that we can choose to push back or pull back on a case-by-case basis (as opposed to *always* pushing back or *always* pulling back as our default strategy). Secondly, there are a wide variety of possible responses to any conflict and each response has a different set of costs and benefits associated with it. Third, when we let off the steam in small increments, it doesn't build up or put us in danger of exploding. And finally, because I have memorized Rosenberg's mental framework, (when you _____, I feel _____, I need _____, and I want you to _____), I can quickly and easily express myself in a way that is honest, clear, professional, and opens the space for real communication and conflict resolution.

Weekly Challenge

This week, I challenge each of you to:

- Gently ask yourself: How do I manage conflict? Am I carrying around unresolved anger at people in my department? Am I in danger of exploding? Are there ways I could engage in conflict that would allow me to express myself more effectively?
- Notice how you feel when conflict arises this week.
- If you are an underrepresented faculty member, acknowledge that anger is a healthy response to persistent racial and gender inequality.
- Imagine several different ways you could respond to conflicts that arise (pushing back and/or pulling back).
- Assess what you would gain and what you would lose by making different choices.
- Try using compassionate communication in a low-level, low-risk conflict situation this week (but always in person and not over email!).
- Write every day this week for 30-60 minutes! If you find yourself unable to write because you’re upset over an unresolved conflict, that’s a good indicator that it’s time to resolve it.

We often hear the generic advice to "pick your battles." This week, I want to encourage each of us to fundamentally rethink the idea that we have to wait until conflicts reach the stage of "battle"! Instead, let’s recognize that conflict is a normal outcome of people working together in an academic community. As a result, let’s begin to imagine ourselves as professionals who are comfortable, confident, and capable of resolving conflicts in our day-to-day lives.

I hope this week brings each of you the ability to assert yourself on a regular basis, the courage to express your feelings in ways that let off emotional steam incrementally, and the deep sense of empowerment that comes from engaging in healthy conflicts that strengthen (instead of weaken) our professional relationships.

Peace & Productivity,
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Links:
[1] http://search.barnesandnoble.com/Nonviolent-Communication/Marshall-B-Rosenberg/e/9781892005038/?itm=1&USRI=nonviolent+communication+a+language+of+life+create

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