# Myths That Make Chairs Feel They Are Powerless

## *Six fallacies that stifle change — and how to overcome them*

By Ann F. Lucas

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After decades of giving unquestioning respect, the public has become demanding, critical, and angry with higher education. Employers are dissatisfied with graduates who lack skills in oral and written communication, critical-thinking ability, and being effective team members. Moreover, after almost two decades of downsizing, and the perception that no one's job is safe even though the organization is doing well, the public is angry at the sense of entitlement of academics who retain tenure, whether or not they are productive. This is the source of much of the external pressure for post-tenure review.

Higher education must respond to external criticism that demands change in the system, and to internal awareness of challenges arising from virtual universities and corporate classrooms. Whether that change is improving student learning, relating methodology to course objectives, curriculum renewal, or broader interventions such as outcomes assessment, service-learning, or integrating technology, chairs often feel helpless in the face of necessary innovation.

Developing faculty who will be responsive to these kinds of changes seems a formidable task to chairs. Despite the colossal need for leadership at the departmental level, and the position that the American Association for Higher Education and the Pew Rountables have taken that the department is the place where change should begin, chairs often state that there is nothing they can do to initiate change in the department. Not only do they not know how to be change agents, they do not believe that they have the power to bring about change. Fewer than one-third of 4,500 chairs in self-report data I have collected reported any degree of success in motivating difficult colleagues or poor teachers who are tenured. Chairs also report problems in getting faculty to accept a "fair share" of the work of the department, and in dealing with conflict in the department. There is a feeling of powerlessness in the face of such difficulties, primarily because faculty are tenured and thus presumably resistive to change. On campus after campus, chairs have repeated to me a series of myths they believe as justification for being unable to modify the status quo.

A myth, particularly one in which there is a strong belief, is a fixed perception of a situation that in turn dictates what an individual can control and what cannot be changed. The "rules of the game" develop from such an attribution or label; for example, whether chairs will try to deal with difficult colleagues, or ignore the situation because they believe there is nothing they can do that will make a difference. Thus, chairs build high walls around themselves and around

circumstances that not only control their behavior but justify how they choose to behave. Whenever individuals describe a situation as having no solution, or see it only as a dichotomy having just two opposed alternatives, it is probable that they are engaging in premature closure. In other words, they have stopped trying to generate options to the problem, and often put themselves in no-win situations.

From my observations, here are the six most frequent fixed beliefs, or myths, that are dysfunctional for the chairs who hold them, accompanied each time by my rebuttal.

**1.** *"I am elected by my colleagues to serve at their pleasure for only three or four years, then I will be a faculty member again. Therefore, there is nothing I can do to deal with the problems."*

The belief in an inability to do anything as chair because a person is simply a peer among equals conveys an aura of humility and democracy in action; yet it can effectively leave a department without a leader. Particularly when a chair is elected by peers for a limited term, choosing to be a team leader is a valuable choice of leadership style. As team leader, a chair can take an active role in seeking meaningful input and full participation from everyone in the department so that faculty members can plan and organize themselves to function most effectively. Being a team leader requires setting shared goals with the department and individual goals with individual faculty members so that everyone can focus on how they can achieve departmental goals while realizing their own. Goal setting with individuals and providing feedback on performance in a supportive climate are the strongest forces a chair can use for motivating faculty. When chairs are passive because they feel there is nothing they can do, departments, and often faculty, stagnate.

**2.** *"It is my turn in the barrel. I don't particularly want to be chair, but we all have to take a turn."*

Given academic norms that administration of any sort is a necessary evil, such statements by an incoming department chair do not usually raise concern among faculty; on the contrary, faculty often worry that people who want to be chair may be seeking power. However, when someone doesn't want to be chair, neither the department nor its faculty will benefit by having a person in that role simply because it is his or her "turn." What is most likely is that such an individual will behave in a passive-resistive fashion and accomplish nothing for the department. Whenever he or she is chided for not taking some responsibility, the response can always be, "But I didn't ask to be chair."

**3.** *"I am simply a peer among equals. I am not a manager."*

This is a good example of generating only two options. "I am either a peer or a manager. There is nothing in between." As chair, an individual is no longer just a peer among equals. Chairs have responsibilities that are different from those of faculty members. Although all chairs have to perform some management functions, they don't have to become managers; they can become leaders.

**4.** *"I have neither carrot nor stick. It is not possible either to reward or punish faculty members."*

It is simplistic to think that rewards include only economic benefits, and that punishment means only the firing of a faculty member. There are many more meaningful ways to reward people; and punishment has so many negative side effects, it is rarely an alternative of choice in motivating others. When chairs are respected colleagues, they have the ability to reinforce faculty for the latter's work. Being taken seriously by a colleague who appreciates the quality of what an individual is doing is both rewarding and motivating. Moreover, chairs usually have major input into personnel decision making, scheduling of courses, release time, and allocation of resources. Therefore, despite the fact that it is not realistic, the perception that chairs have "neither carrot nor stick" certainly contributes to their feelings of powerlessness.

**5.** *"I am neither fish nor fowl. Being neither faculty member nor administrator, my role is not clear."*

Granted that role conflict is stressful, a chair must be the conduit between faculty and administration, representing the needs of each to the other. This requires that a chair be an articulate spokesperson for depart-

ment members to administration. It is also necessary for a chair to be a public relations person for faculty members so that their accomplishments, their impact on the discipline at the state or national level, and their outreach to the community can be appreciated by the rest of the university.

In addition, however, because they represent administration to faculty, chairs must at times advance points of view that represent what is deemed to be good for the college or university over what is perceived as good for individual faculty members. For example, faculty often strongly resist a chair's request that they teach an 8 a.m. class, a late evening course, or a course that meets three times a week. In each of these cases, faculty may feel that the chair has lost the ability to identify with colleagues and is behaving like an administrator. Chairs must handle such conflict in their roles with tact, fairness, and good humor.

**6.** *"I have no power. Therefore, I can do nothing."*

Many chairs feel they have no power, though this perception is not usually accurate. In the context of the work of the chair, power is the ability to influence faculty to achieve their own goals as they accomplish the work of the department. Chairs have enough power to motivate faculty to increase student learning by teaching effectively, to increase scholarly productivity, and to increase service or outreach activities. All they need is to know how to go about it.

The kinds of power that chairs have to motivate faculty include position power, personal power, and expert power. Position power, often referred to as legitimate power, is related to the authority individuals have simply because of their positions. The extent to which chairs control rewards and punishments varies markedly from one institution to another, but when their input on administrative matters is weighted heavily by a college or university, their position power is increased. Thus, chairs have strong position power when their judgment is given serious consideration in personnel decision making.

Position power is by and large a given. Personal power, however, varies considerably and can be increased in legitimate ways. If chairs treat everyone with respect, if they are perceived as working for and fighting for the well-being of their faculty members when the cause is just, if chairs create a supportive climate in the department, and if they give people recognition and visibility for their achievements, their personal power becomes greater.

A third kind of power is expert power, which is based on knowledge and control of resources. Chairs usually know better than faculty how to get things accomplished in a college or university, particularly how to do things that are not described in faculty handbooks and other formal documents.

## Overcoming Mythology

Chairs do have considerable power, then, but when they believe these six myths their effectiveness is undoubtedly reduced. However, institutions also have great responsibility for enhancing competent leadership by taking the chair role more seriously. Although the 80,000 chairs in colleges and universities constitute a knowledgeable body of leadership and influence, too often they are overlooked as the valuable resource they can be. There is little evidence that sufficient care is given to selection, training, professional development, and support of chairs.

Furthermore, if chairs are to be good team leaders and effective agents of change, they need to learn how to initiate those difficult conversations in which the collective wisdom of their colleagues is gathered so that commitment is developed to confront challenges that face their departments. Chairs need to learn the skills for leading change. Chairs must learn how to confront and manage negative behaviors of faculty and staff. They need to learn more about motivating department members. Chairs must master skills in creating a supportive communication climate, managing constructive feedback, resolving conflict, and be engaged in their own ongoing leadership development. In addition, some of the mind-deadening paperwork — the primary complaint of chairs — must be handled by computer or delegated to a technical assistant or a competent secretary so that chairs have time to be leaders.

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*Ann F. Lucas is the author of* Strengthening Departmental Leadership: A Team Building Guide for Chairs in Colleges and Universities *(Jossey-Bass, 1994). Her most recent book,* Leading Academic Change: Essential Roles for Chairs, *will be published by Jossey-Bass in January 2000.*