



CHOOSING SUBUNIT LEADERS - QUICK TIPS

Selecting appropriate leaders for subordinate units e.g., sections or divisions within a large department, or department heads within a college, is critical to the long-term quality and excellence of the enterprise as well as efficient functioning of the administrative operation. The consequences of both good and bad decisions can affect a unit long beyond the departure of the selected individuals. Although it may seem that some leaders have an innate knack for picking quality subordinates, much can be learned by carefully thinking about the following points...

Fully Understand the Scope of the Position

- Some tasks are standard and largely governed by institutional policies and procedures. These would include such things as management of expenditures within the constraints of the budget, ensuring that students are recruited, academic programs are delivered and research infrastructure is sustained and improved as necessary.
- Other tasks are more difficult to define and to some significant extent are guided by the individual's life experiences and core professional philosophy. Standards for faculty recruitment, promotion and tenure and retention are some examples, as is how well and effectively the individual communicates - and listens.
- Excellent units have leaders capable of developing and articulating a vision for the discipline that is authenticated by faculty, that serves to guide internal decisions, and that makes the case for institutional as well as donor support.

Recognize That a Leader's Temperament Matters

There are a number of qualities common to good leaders. Effective leaders are:

- Collegial, yet firm; humane without being gullible.
- Sufficiently humble enough to be able to admit mistakes, and to accept and consider the advice of others.
- Willing to sacrifice for their convictions.
- Capable of knowing that leadership is not about personal glory but rather the success of those being led.
- Able to treat all they encounter fairly.

Engage Faculty and Unit Members in the Selection Process

- This is good politics - and it is always the case that unit members have input that can be invaluable. A leader who does not see the advantage in this may be incapable of sustaining excellence over time.
- Recruitment of candidates is always enhanced by appointing a search committee composed of individuals committed to a successful outcome and willing to invest serious time in the process.
- The selected individual must be (or be able to become) a member of the team. The senior leadership of the unit should be able to rely on the commitment of subordinate leaders to the good of the whole. Subordinate leaders who, because of personal ambition, jealousy or incompetence, seek to undermine the success of the department, college or institution, are toxic and should be avoided to the maximum extent possible in the selection process.
- Seek and give weight to the opinions of faculty and other unit members in developing the final decision.





Continue to Monitor & Provide Support

Once the individual is in place it is important that you continue to offer them support and, if needed, advice.

- New leaders should be both mentored and coached by their supervisor on a regular basis.
 - ✦ These sessions should be scheduled from the beginning of the appointment and the time should be protected to the maximum possible extent.
 - ✦ The senior leader must clearly articulate expectations and boundaries.
 - ✦ Both newly appointed as well as seasoned leaders make mistakes. The focus should be on turning the mistakes into opportunities to learn, rather than a pretext for scolding.
- The appointing leader must be willing and able to provide constructive, candid guidance and feedback, and to focus on making the new leader as successful as possible.
 - ✦ While it is important to keep tabs on how a newly appointed leader is doing by listening to reactions of people within the unit, it is also crucial to not undermine them in their new position by letting people “go around” them in bringing their issues to someone higher up. This can be a tricky thing to balance.
 - ✦ If the institution does not already have formal evaluation processes in place for assessing the progress of newly appointed leaders, explore options of establishing those formal processes yourself.

There Will be Times When the Individual Can't do the Job

- More often than not this emerges in the form of messages from the members of the subordinate unit, concerns brought forward by institutional human resources or financial managers, or from constituents of the unit (students, alumni, supporting foundations, funding agencies, etc...)
- The senior leader should take these signals seriously but not act in the absence of due process that either validates the concerns or demonstrates them to be baseless. That process should allow for input not just from the complaining parties but representatives from each of the unit's constituencies. The nature of the process will vary according to institutional policies but should be transparent and fair to the extent possible.
- Unless there is an obvious basis for immediate removal (e.g., illegal activities or it is clear that trust in the individual's ability to provide effective leadership has been fully compromised) the subordinate leader should be made fully aware of the need for change preferably in a conversation and then restated in a letter of expectations. There should be defined period of time to demonstrate change.
- If the assessment at the end of the that period remains negative, then a decision must be made and implemented.
- The senior leader has a responsibility at this point, to the extent justifiable, to assist the transition of the individual being removed to the next state in that person's career.

