



Dealing With A Disruptive Predecessor - Quick Tips

A wise and thoughtful former administrator will refrain from judgmental comments and offer private advice to the replacement only when asked. Sadly, that is not always what happens, and experience shows that after leaving a post, some find it challenging to overcome the temptation to continue to be involved in decisions affecting the unit. (This can be even more difficult when the leader returns to a faculty position in the same unit.) Comments, even well-intended, can undermine a successor working to establish a clear identity and gain the respect and support of faculty and staff. Even more complex are those situations in which the successor is faced with dealing with unhelpful and even disruptive remarks. Here is some advice if you are faced with this awkward situation.

Create the Best Possible Relationship with Your Predecessor

- Establish regular, not overly frequent, meetings with the individual and earnestly seek advice on issues important to the unit. An experienced leader may have insights that can be invaluable. And, in the process, you may effectively neutralize potential criticism that you never solicit input from an individual who is undoubtedly respected by some, if not all.
- Show respect for your predecessor through positive comments in conversations and meetings. Even if the predecessor left a mess or caused lingering problems, demonstrate respect for his or her willingness to serve. This will reflect well on you as a leader and leave the former leader room for personal dignity.
- Avoid to the maximum extent any criticism either privately or publicly of the individual and his or her tenure. Maintain silence rather than say anything derogatory. Anything you say may be repeated and turned against you.
- If it is necessary to alter or revoke decisions of the former leader, do what must be done. Before taking any such step, it is generally wise to seek advice and open comment before acting. This can protect you from the appearance of creating change for selfish reasons or out of your own vanity.

Take Proactive Steps to Establish Your Identity as the Leader

- Engage actively and purposefully with faculty and staff, both individually and in groups. This will increase your knowledge of people and programs in the unit, and build respect and trust for you as a leader.
- Make decisions, even small ones, that demonstrate both your leadership role and commitment to the well-being of the unit. In the absence of an identified, willing leader someone will emerge as the authority figure. If it appears that you have not assumed that responsibility, your predecessor may.
- Speak genuinely and with pride of the accomplishments of “our” unit. Use “we” as often as possible when discussing the unit. Avoid “I” messages and talking about “your” unit in favor of those that emphasize the contributions of many: “Our department has succeeded in key recruitments this year” is a far better leadership message than “I recruited great faculty this year.”
- Be visible and active. Attend events, recognize accomplishments, and be a cheerleader for the good work going on in the unit.
- If the beginning of your tenure permits new investments or improvements in the work of the unit or individual members of it, be involved in transmitting the good news, and involve others in planning for ways to build upon those gains for others.

Provide a Positive Vision of Progress for the Unit

Engage as many people as possible in feeling a part of the unit’s future.





- Work on a jointly-developed positive vision for the future. Develop sound bites and versions of “elevator speeches;” i.e. short and strong phrases and sentences conveying the theme of the vision. Use them often. See our set of Quick Tips about constructing personal scripts to help you construct useful “go-to” phrase for such situations!
- Where possible and appropriate, support strong ideas and new initiatives, or engage unit members in forward-looking planning.
- If there is not a strong and vibrant process in the unit for identifying and nominating faculty members for awards and disciplinary recognition, start one. If there is, get involved in supporting and advancing it any way you can.
- Engage key faculty members in advancement efforts and showcase their work.
- Support student groups that exemplify the positive about your unit.

Take Stronger Action Where Necessary

This may be the case especially when the former leader has been removed for “cause” and deliberately seeks to disrupt the efforts of the successor.

- Do not hesitate to ask your predecessor, politely (and privately if possible), to refrain from critical comments.
- Absent compliance, avoid opportunities for public confrontation and bullying – avoid any escalation on your part.
- Seek the advice of trusted members of the faculty. You may be surprised by the level of awareness and willingness to be helpful.
- At an appropriate moment, you should speak openly and honestly to your direct superior in the administrative structure about the ongoing efforts to disrupt. Provide the information so the person to whom you report is informed; he or she may have useful insights to share. In this conversation, do not in any way abrogate your responsibility to address the problem to the fullest possible extent within the authority and resources available to you. Make clear what you have already done and will continue to do.
- If deliberate disruption becomes an impediment to unit progress, determine if a reassignment is possible. Is there an important task force crying out for leadership? Something that might be based away from your unit?
- In the extreme case, the individual may be dealing with mental health or debilitating personal challenges e.g., substance abuse, relationship challenges, or overwhelming financial difficulties. In this instance, it may be prudent to seek advice from a qualified behavioral professional.

