Research Articles

The Right Administrative Stuff

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Abstract

This article is intended to provoke thought and discussion about what it takes to be a department chair and what it feels like to be a department chair. To accomplish our purpose, we draw an analogy between test pilots and department chairs based on Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* (1979). We reason that test pilots and department chairs should share certain qualities, or what Wolfe calls "the right stuff," to carry out their respective missions. Chief among those qualities are leadership, trust, fairness, an ability to build consensus, a positive attitude, and clear communication. In making our case, we contrast academic leadership, or "piloting," with academic management, or "being a passenger in," the academic enterprise. The article is based on our collective administrative experience chairing a variety of academic departments in parks, recreation, and tourism, as well as the administrative experience of several generations of our colleagues, who, for the good of the order, have taken a turn at the controls.

Keywords: *department chair; for the good of the order; right administrative stuff; test pilot*

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In *The Right Stuff*, Tom Wolfe (1979) told the story of fighter pilots, test pilots, and astronauts at the beginning of the great "space race" of the 1950s and 60s. The crux of the story turned on what it was that separated test pilots from all the other pilots. What was it they had that other pilots did not? As Wolfe told it, ". . . Herein the world was divided into those who had it and those who did not. This quality, this *it*, was never named, however, nor was it talked about in any way. . . . As to just what this ineffable quality was. . . ." (Wolfe, p. 24)

In this article we do for department chairs what Wolfe did for test pilots. What is it about some department chairs that makes them more effective than others? What separates them from the pack? Moreover, can this quality—this right administrative stuff—be understood well enough to make some pronouncements about it? We draw on the administrative experience of all five authors, each of whom served as department chair during his career, as well as augmenting their voices with a chorus of other department chairs to illustrate what it takes—the right administrative stuff—to pilot an academic program in parks, recreation, and tourism.

Leadership

When the space race heated up in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the National Aeronautical and Space Administration (NASA) needed astronauts to sit atop rockets that would propel the United States toward the moon. Test pilots from Edwards Air Force Base in California were a logical choice. They had demonstrated the right stuff in probing the frontier of jet propulsion, and they could be counted on to do the same for space exploration. There was, however, an immediate problem. Concomitant with the launching of space flight was the beginning of high-speed computer technology and highly sophisticated aeronautical engineering. The scientists and engineers responsible for developing space age technology viewed astronauts as mere passengers in their computer-programmed, rocket-propelled capsules, and not as pilots of those capsules. In Wolfe's words, "So he [an astronaut] was not being trained to *fly* the capsule. He was being trained to ride in it" (p. 185). Test pilots, on the other hand, thought they should control the capsule's flight, or at least have the power to manually override the automatic controls in case of a malfunction. The idea, as the test pilots understood it, "was that a man should have the ability to go up in a hurtling piece of machinery and put his hide on the line and have the moxie, the reflexes, the experience, the coolness, to pull it back at the last yawning moment. . . ." (Wolfe, pp. 186–187). Test pilots understood that what a man could contribute to space exploration that technology could not was the right stuff.

The difference between being a pilot and a passenger on any moving body turns on the issue of control. Who is at the joystick? Whether it is a top-down military organization or a bottom-up university organization, test pilots and department chairs are responsible for charting a course and navigating their way in and around a multitude of hazards en route to their final destination. This does not mean department chairs need to make all the decisions for their department nor does it mean they should operate unilaterally. What it does mean is that whatever happens when they are at the controls is ultimately their responsibility. They have to answer for it. Test pilots understand this responsibility and the accountability that goes with it. Department chairs should understand it as well (Schultz, 1993; Sessoms, 2007).

It is important at the outset, then, to differentiate between department chairs who are "pilots" and those who are "passengers" in the academic enterprise. Leadership is akin to being a pilot, while management is akin to being a passenger. Leaders, as Searle

(2007) characterizes them, are "first among peers"(p. 147). Managers, on the other hand, are colleagues along for the ride (Culkin, 1993; Rossman, 2007), and while they may be charged with flipping a few switches here and there, the primary functioning of their academic department is on automatic pilot, guided by a strategic plan perhaps, policies and procedures, or some other regimen governing the way things are programmed to be done. In such departments, faculty members tend to behave like those NASA scientists and engineers. They expect their department chairs to be passengers and not pilots. While such departments might manage to stay aloft, they are not likely to soar. Soaring requires skillful piloting.

Paradoxically, department chairs who assume responsibility for the welfare of their departments must give up a good part of themselves to get the job done (Brantley, 2007; Harper, personal communication, March 29, 2013; McDonald, personal communication, March 29, 2013). They must believe enough in what they are doing and the people they are doing it with to put their own agendas on the back burner for the duration of the mission (Chu, 2012; Hecht, 1999; Leaming, 1998). Test pilots do this by putting their lives on the line. Department chairs do this by putting their teaching, scholarship, and service on the line (McDonald, 2013; Twardzik, 2007; Young, 2007). Department chairs, like test pilots, are thus required to do something quite remarkable—sacrifice themselves for the good of the order (Wellman, Dustin, Sharik, & Schleien, 2006). Leadership is a selfless act. Our collective experience has taught us that the only way this can work is for department chairs, like test pilots, to surround themselves with people in whom they have the utmost trust and confidence (Cruse, 1993; Lamke, personal communication, March 29, 2013; Lamke, 2007). They both must rely on a form of ground control for assistance. They cannot accomplish the mission by themselves.

Trust

Most any maxim about good leadership begins with "First, get the right people on board." But what exactly is meant by the "right" people? For space exploration, it means finding test pilots with the right stuff and ground control personnel who are competent and reliable. For academic leadership, it means finding a professor with the right administrative stuff and colleagues who are passionate about their subject matter, intrinsically motivated, self-driven, dedicated to their own continuing education, eager to share what they learn with students in the classroom and peers in the literature, and are collegial. Like their department chair, they have to believe in something larger than themselves and be willing to give up something of themselves for the good of the order. And like their chair, they must be responsible and accountable for the work they do. When a department chair is surrounded by such colleagues, he should just get out of their way and leave them to their work, secure in the knowledge that they will conduct themselves in a manner that serves the department's best interests while simultaneously serving their own (Cruse, 1993; Lamke, 2013; McDonald, 2013).

Trust, however, has to work both ways. Just as a department chair must trust her colleagues, those colleagues must trust the department chair. In both instances, trust must be earned (Murphy, personal communication, March 29, 2013). Trust is like a rivet that holds faculty members and department chairs together (Wright, personal communication, April 15, 2013). When the seal is tight, trust can withstand a lot of pressure without falling apart. Good maintenance helps as well. But if the seal is unevenly set or broken, things

come undone quickly under pressure. This is true of academic departments (Dustin, personal communication, March 29, 2013) as well as space capsules, as evidenced by the disintegration of the Space Challenger in 1986 due to a faulty 0-ring seal.

As Smith (2007) reminds us, "An administrator doesn't have power—he or she has trust, and speaks for his or her colleagues, and that's it" (p. 169). When department chairs enjoy their faculty's trust, they are emboldened to represent the department to the larger academic community with confidence, promoting a unified vision of the department's disciplinary focus, prospects for growth, and place in the academy. Without that trust, department chairs become tentative and are hesitant to claim much of anything. Quoting Smith:

> The only power a chair or dean really has comes from the trust and respect of colleagues. You might be able to force a few small things once in a while, but there are so many checks and balances, and so many bright and obdurate people watching and second- guessing everything you do (Ibid).

Trust is a symbiotic relationship.

Fairness

If trust is like a rivet that holds faculty members and department chairs together, fairness is the test of a department's structural integrity. Once a professor becomes department chair, distancing occurs (Ford, 2007; Lundegren, 1993; Witt, 2007). The department chair is no longer a peer in the eyes of colleagues. While the department chair may not feel anything has changed, colleagues will. The department chair is now the "face" of the department, someone who has position and status, someone who evaluates others, makes independent recommendations on tenure and promotion, and doles out merit pay when it is to be had. Everything changes. Faculty members will reserve judgment until they see if the new department chair carries out the duties of the position in a fair, consistent, and equitable manner (Chu, 2012; Hecht, 1999; Leaming, 1998; Murphy, 2013).

Treating faculty members fairly does not mean treating them equally. Each faculty member is different. Some are easier to like than others, but that should not affect how department chairs deal with them. Friendships with faculty members should not cloud a department chair's judgment, either. And some faculty members are more valuable to the department's mission than others, but neither should that affect fair and equitable treatment. Faculty members need not like their department chair, but they have to believe the chair does not play favorites (Harper, 2013). And department chairs need not like their faculty members, but they should treat them as if they do (Dustin, 2013; Lamke, 2013).

Consensus-Building

The ability to build consensus among faculty members is often touted as a highly desirable trait for department chairs. When everyone is on the same page with respect to vision, mission, and values, it is easier to accomplish what needs to be done (Harper, 2013; Lamke, 2013; McDonald, 2013). At the same time, increasing academic specialization within departments of parks, recreation, and tourism makes for increasing divergences of academic interests, intellectual exchanges, student majors, service commitments, and

professional involvements (Murphy, 2013). Combine this increasingly fragmented nature of departmental makeup with cat-like faculty personalities, and consensus building becomes more of an elusive ideal than a reachable moment.

A better test of a department chair's piloting is when faculty consensus cannot be reached, when the faculty is irrevocably split on a course of action, when the department chair herself is called upon to exercise the right administrative stuff. Recall Apollo 13. Then recall Wolfe's admonition that "a man [woman] should have the ability to go up in a hurtling piece of machinery and put his [her] hide on the line and have the moxie, the reflexes, the experience, the coolness, to pull it back at the last yawning moment. . . ." (pp. 186–187). When it comes to successful piloting, it often boils down to a "consensus" of one. Sound judgment is required, tempered by experience, perspective, and the greater visibility that comes with sitting in the cockpit. On those occasions, what matters is that all faculty members have a voice, they are all heard, and the department chair takes what is said into account. The chair then has to exercise the right administrative stuff. Even if a decision goes against what some faculty members want, they have been heard, and their input has contributed to the department chair's final decision. The success of this inclusionary process depends entirely on mutual trust. Even then, some faculty members will believe that if their thinking does not prevail, it is because the department chair did not really listen to them (Dustin, 2013). They may then assume the air of disgruntled passengers, thinking they would be better served by flying the plane themselves.

Academic departments, like aircraft, are as strong as their weakest link. Seldom do department chairs build a department from scratch. They come aboard with most of the "passengers" already in place, many of them with lifetime passes. The department chair's primary task, like a pilot's, is to get the most out of what he has to work with. When things are running smoothly, academic departments are like a purring motor. When parts misfire, vibrations occur. Then the department chair's job is to get things purring again. That means rolling up one's sleeves and getting grease on one's hands. At these times, chairing feels more like being an aircraft mechanic than a test pilot. Nonetheless, it is desirable for department chairs to demonstrate that they are competent at a variety of tasks, including teaching, scholarship, and service, as well as administration. Put differently, the chair's primary contribution to consensus-building is leading by example.

Positive Attitude

As Wolfe described it, sitting atop a rocket is not for the faint-hearted. It should not be a tentative undertaking. A positive attitude is a must. The same can be said for department chairs. As Smith (2007) cautioned earlier, bright and obdurate people are watching and second guessing everything department chairs do. In their own way, they act as a form of checks and balances on administrative authority. While that is fine and good, without a positive attitude, it can be demoralizing for a department chair who is trying his best to work for the good of the order to be criticized constantly (Jensen, 2007). Staying above the fray is healthy. Few academic problems constitute genuine crises. Indeed, administrators who have the ability to describe problems as challenges are displaying the right administrative stuff (Dustin, 2013). Besides, unlike flying, when things go wrong in academe, planes neither fall out of the sky nor do space shuttles come hurtling back to earth.

Chairing a department, like piloting, requires risk taking (Brantley, 2007; Dustin, 2013) and faculty members are often risk averse. Playing it safe to placate naysayers and

wet blankets is not what is meant by the right administrative stuff. To the contrary, courage is required, fortified by a can-do attitude. Pilots must learn to navigate through turbulence and so must department chairs. Focus and resolve are critical. Connect with like-minded others (Lamke, 2007), accentuate the positive (Jensen, 2007), advance a meaningful agenda (Murphy, 2007), do what needs to be done (Delaney, 2007), and no matter the reverberations, stay the course (Gray, as reported in Jensen, 2007).

A positive, can-do attitude is everything, and one should not strap in to the pilot's seat without it. A soul search may be required to determine whether piloting an academic department is worth it. Recognizing that a professor's life is about as good as it gets (Dustin, 2007), giving up that life for administration should not be undertaken lightly. Like test pilots, department chairs forgo many earthly comforts (e. g., control over their time, teaching, research, and service) when they place themselves in the middle of everyone else's flight plan. Being able to find joy and satisfaction in facilitating the accomplishments of others is paramount (Dustin, 2013; Harper, 2013; Lamke, 2013; McDonald, 2013; Murphy, 2013). As noted earlier, chairing an academic department, like sitting atop a rocket, is largely a selfless act.

Clear Communication

If leadership, trust, fairness, consensus-building, and a positive attitude are essential components of the right administrative stuff, clear communication is the lubricant that allows the component parts to work well together. In the same way astronauts need to be in contact with mission control and pilots need to be in contact with air traffic control, department chairs need to be in contact with faculty, staff, students, administrators, and alumni. That being said, communication is a two-way street. Astronauts, pilots, and department chairs must be constantly aware of what is going on all around them if they are to stay the course.

It is not just communication, however. It is clear communication, which means saying what one means and meaning what one says. Communication can obfuscate matters when it is carried on behind closed doors, in the hallways, or around a water cooler. Transparency helps, though knowing what to say, when to say it, and to whom to say it is fraught with complexity (Logan, 1993). Communication should respect the chain of command. Department concerns should always be aired thoroughly at the local level first. Taking matters "outside" wrests control from department chairs and gives it to upper administration. That is never good for department chairs or their departments (Searle, 2006). On those occasions, trust comes undone and little things can be blown out of proportion with disastrous consequences (Dustin, 2013). Think of the space shuttle Columbia in 2003 and the seemingly innocuous piece of foam that led to its disintegration.

The Right Administrative Stuff

There are countless things department chairs can do with their time. Unlike pilots, who have preflight checklists to make sure everything is in good working order, there is no such detailed checklist for department chairs. What their job entails is an open question. Though each college and university will have its own institutional expectations, and though faculty, staff, and students will have strong opinions about what the position ought to involve as well, each individual who takes control of an academic department has an opportunity to put her or his own stamp on things.

While some people may find considerable joy in the mere act of leading an academic department, having an agenda or destination in mind gives more meaning and purpose to the work. Like pilots, department chairs ought to know where they are going and what the expected time of arrival is. Knowing when to turn the controls over to a new pilot is also part of the right administrative stuff. Giving up the controls is easier for some department chairs than others, especially if they love flying.

In the end, chairing an academic department of parks, recreation, and tourism requires leadership characterized by vision, courage, and a willingness to take calculated risks to guide a faculty into uncharted territory. The work of the department chair demands much more from an individual than merely going along for the ride. It demands skillful piloting, which in turn demands the right administrative stuff, an ineffable quality that some have and others do not. And while it is beyond our ability to describe exactly what we mean by the right administrative stuff, we can at least bring our "preflight" briefing to a logical conclusion by pointing in the right direction:

> When a professor takes on the role of department chair, it's because there is a personal fire, unknown to anybody else, to accomplish something greater than the usual academic satisfactions and challenges. It has to be the fulfillment of leading into better ways of doing things, carte blanche to part the waters, the excitement of creating new opportunities unseen by others, and the satisfaction of watching them develop into awareness and acceptability as policy and eventually programs and benefits to students, the department, the professional field, and the larger society (Twardzik, 2007, p. 117).

Twardzik's choice of words gives us a glimpse of the right administrative stuff: "a personal fire," "accomplish something greater," "leading into better ways of doing things," "carte blanche to part the waters," and "creating new opportunities unseen by others." This is not the voice of a passenger who is along for the ride. This is the voice of a test pilot who dreams of exploring the farthest reaches of the academic universe. This is the right administrative stuff.

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