Departmental Culture and Climate: Navigating the Academic Department

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Departmental Culture and Climate
Navigating the Academic Department

By Nina Brown, EdD

This second essay in the series of six on “Navigating the Academic Department” will focus on the culture and climate in an academic department. Many if not most faculty enter a department that has already established a culture and climate most of which is not openly acknowledged. Agazarian (1997) termed this as social convention for therapy groups that include social defenses, communication patterns and ingrained social norms that also seem to apply to an academic department.

Just as in group therapy, the culture and climate in a department play majors roles in the effect and impact on the group members, that is the faculty. Culture is defined here as the “knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, behavioral practices and customs and habits that are the group’s traditional ideas and values” (Sue et al., 1987). Climate is defined as the prevailing conditions affecting morale, satisfaction and productivity. Usually, faculty enter a department’s culture which has been established over time and can be
mainly on the nonconscious level, while climate can be how the culture is acted on at the current time.

In group therapy, the group collectively established its norms on both the conscious level with rules to guide interactions and behaviors, and on the nonconscious level with an unconscious group decision for expected behaviors, taboo topics, and other group matters. Departments and groups have formal and informal rules, expectations, and desires that are seldom verbalized but are the basis for the climate encountered by faculty. This essay will focus on some of the components for an ideal department culture and climate, and descriptions of some behaviors that can signal a toxic culture and climate.

An Ideal Academic Department

Following are some components for an ideal department that are categorized as either mainly under the department chair’s control, and those mainly under the individual faculty’s control.

Department Chair’s Control and Responsibility

- Trust exists between faculty and department chair and faculty has evidence that the chair acts in their behalf.
- The goals and tasks set for faculty are consistent with their personal performance expectations and with the department’s goals and objectives.
- There is sufficient evidence that there are equitable distribution of resources.
- Performance expectations and evaluations for each faculty member are fair, applied equitably and are communicated to them early in the academic year.
There is an absence of significant university produced stress caused by unannounced changes and other transitions.

The department chair ensures that matters affecting faculty are made transparent.

**Faculty Control and Responsibility**

- Faculty accept, appreciate, and respect each other.
- Dissent thoughts and ideas are listened to, tolerated, and carefully considered.
- Communications are clear, open, direct, and truthful.
- Faculty freely seek out ways to interact with each other.
- There is an absence of subgroups, cliques and secrets that affect faculty’s welfare in the department.
- Conflicts are not avoided, ignored or suppressed, they are addressed for constructive resolution.
- Collaboration and competition among faculty are constructive.
- Collegiality is encouraged and fostered.
- Creative tensions are managed and controlled.

Take a moment to reflect on your department at the current time and note how many of the descriptors are present either for the chair or for the faculty.

**A Collegial and Constructive Department Culture and Climate**

While you may not have an ideal department culture and climate, you may have a collegial and constructive one. Following are some indicators for positive feelings that faculty can have when there is a collegial and constructive department culture and climate.
High morale – Johnsrud (1996)
Feeling mentored – Plata (1996)
Autonomy - Tack & Patitu (1992)
Institutional support is clear – Mellow, van Slyck & Eynon (2003)
Broad definition of scholarship – Antonio (2002)
Having a voice and being heard- Turner (2000)

It’s not that everything has to be perfect for faculty to feel appreciated, connected and productive, it just that there needs to be an absence of toxicity as presented in the next section, and the presence of intangibles that are valued by faculty.

Reflect on how many of these describe how you feel in your current department.

A Toxic Department Climate

Following are some descriptors for a toxic department climate. Many of these descriptors will not be verbalized, and some may not be in faculty awareness, but they nevertheless can have a negative effect on faculty.

- Ambiguity and uncertainty about performance expectations that cause anxiety because of the unknown nature of how the performance will be evaluated.
- Many faculties perceive that they are treated unfairly. While not all faculty feel that they are treated unfairly if many do feel this way it can be unsettling for them.
- Policies and procedures are changed or implemented or initiated capriciously without faculty input or sufficient notice.
• Faculty and the department chair failure to abide by or follow established and approved policies and procedures without negative consequences.
• Communications are lacking, unclear or inaccurate.
• Meetings and other interactions reflect a lack of flexibility, or room for differences of perceptions or opinions by other faculty and/or the department chair.
• The department chair seems to easily tolerate incompetence tolerated.
• There are several faculties that demonstrate that they feel alienation and disengaged.
• Faculty are reluctant to provide input even when offered an opportunity to do so.
• There are secrets about matters that affect faculty and/or the department but are hidden from most or all faculty.
• There is considerable complaining, carping, and whining by faculty, or there are disengaged faculty.
• Faculty describe the department has having low morale.

Reflect on your current department culture and climate and note if or how many of these descriptors apply. If there are 5 or more, you may want to consider the level of toxicity present in the department.

**Stressors**

There are also some stressors that are not under the individual’s control that can contribute to faculty’s dissatisfaction with the department. Examples follow but are not limited to these.

Isolation and/or exclusion from department and other faculty discussions, projects and/or assignments.

Some faculty are assigned extra department service which erodes the time left for scholarship or professional service on the national/international
Some faculty frequently encounter sexist, racist and/or homophobic language and behaviors from other faculty, administrators and/or students.

Although prohibited by most universities’ policies faculty can encounter harassment, bullying and/or sexual harassment which may be ignored or minimized by the chair or other administrators.

There are many intentional or unintentional microaggressions where it may not seem to the receiver that it is in their best interest to speak up about how they are affected.

Ambiguity, uncertainty, and lack of clarity about expectations and about performance evaluation.

Navigating A Toxic Department Climate

Tips for Faculty

- Focus more on your scholarship and classes.
- Find a mentor or confident outside of your department, and don’t confide in your department colleagues.
- Do not join or participate in a clique.
- Separate your personal life from your professional life.
- Restricts your comments that are criticizing or blaming.
- Document any physical and/or verbal abuse or other bullying or harassing behaviors.

The “Cult” Department Climate

A department climate that is infrequently mentioned is one that is reflective of “cults” that suck you in, make you feel special and involved, but are in fact undermining and promote “Group Think”. Their process can be seen in the
following indicators. Everything seems positive at first, colleagues get close to you very quickly with oversharing and intimacy, there are rituals almost every day, dissent is discouraged and/or punished, the department seems overly obsessed with how they are perceived by others, the department events start to take a more prominent role in your life with numerous social events and working long hours, there is a push to get faculty on the same page in an ideological way, former employees are disparaged or shunned, and you can feel that colleagues play on your insecurities to get you to do things that you don’t want to do and/or that are not in your best interests. This climate usually goes unrecognized by most of the faculty in the department and it is perceived by many as being “harmonious”. Any disquiet you may feel is generally attributed to other possibilities. No fixes or tips are available for this situation except to recognize its negative impact on you and to leave.

References


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