**Boundaries & Powerlessness**

It is a truism that most people in universities feel ***powerless***:

Undergraduates are at the mercy of everyone, their teaching assistants (who rarely recognize their power over their students and thus can be ripe for abusing it) feel they are at the bottom of the power curve, assistant professors feel disenfranchised and powerless, associate professors worry about those who can vote on their promotion, full professors must jockey for position and perks, and department heads know they have very little real power.



But power there is, both real and perceived, in all of these situations.  Pretending it isn’t there doesn’t make it go away.

Not only must you understand the difference between exercising institutionally conferredpower for personal and professional ends, but everyone in your unit must have the same understanding.

The TA should comprehend that it is an abuse of her power over her undergraduate students to offer extra credit to anyone who lends her a leather briefcase for her job interview.  An assistant professor should grasp how difficult candor can be for a graduate student who is asked “are you available to babysit this Saturday”?

Anyone with supervisory responsibilities – especially evaluations that affect salary determinations – should be clear about the lines between official duties and personal favors.  No matter how friendly the office relationships, personal favors blur the lines of personal and professional boundaries.

Good boundaries are needed to separate *personal interactions* from *professional decisions*.   Think about how much harder it is to be fair to people you don’t like than to those you do.  If you cannot tell who your leader favors or dislikes by the way they deal with them, that leader demonstrates good ethical boundaries.  When others can tell, the leader opens himself to accusations of favoritism, retaliation, and divisiveness.

Consistent cordial courtesy with which you treat everyone – from students to colleagues to administration -  is a hallmark of the proper use of our power and management of our boundaries.  Treating all as valued members can help maintain a healthy culture in the department and will contribute to the overall health of any department.

Source:  C.K. Gunsalus, The College Administrator’s Survival Guide

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This is a part of a series of monthly tips from the NDSU Ombud to assist you in preventing, managing and resolving conflict in your department, and keeping Chairs out of the “hot seat”.  Contact Kristine at any time to discuss any issues you are experiencing.