How to consider leadership paths once you've gained tenure (essay)

Submitted by Kerry Ann Rockquemore on September 6, 2017 - 3:00am

This semester I’m dedicating my column to taking tenured faculty members on a step-by-step weekly journey to identifying their posttenure pathway. We’ve already discussed the primary challenges and traps that newly tenured faculty members face. This week I encourage you to focus on facing your new professional reality, examining your beliefs about leadership and reconnecting with who you are.

When I work with newly tenured faculty, it's important to immediately acquaint them with their new reality. By that, I mean it's important to say the following out loud: you have power, you cannot be fired, and -- because you are one of a shrinking number of faculty with tenure -- you are a leader on your campus. It’s important to both say it out loud and let them sit with it for a few minutes. Inevitably, most of the people in the room have not stopped to soak in this profound shift in their professional reality and, more important, have never thought of themselves as leaders.

Rethinking Leadership

It’s not entirely surprising that tenure-track faculty have not previously thought of themselves as leaders. They’ve been focused on winning tenure, and their idea of leadership is synonymous with formal administrative positions. In fact, when asked to identify leaders on their campus, they point to the people who are in the most visible administrative roles, such as their department head, dean, provost, president, chancellor and the like. And if they don’t aspire to one of those positions, they quickly conclude that they aren’t leaders and are not interested in campus leadership.

The assumption that leadership equals an administrative position is an overly narrow definition and one that constrains thinking about posttenure pathways. Consider that there are many definitions of leadership and that expanding your view of leadership may open new and exciting possibilities. I define leadership in the broadest possible way: using your strengths to work for change you care about in a meaningful and consistent way. That more expansive definition means that you can be a leader on your campus no matter what your title, role or position is. And it means that you don’t have to follow a perfectly linear path of sequential steps and successes. You can start right where you are.

Exploring Limiting Beliefs

When you expand your idea of what leadership is and start imagining yourself as a leader,
you may find some limiting beliefs creep up to keep you from moving forward and playing big. Having worked with many tenured faculty members on identifying their posttenure pathways, I know that the moment I invoke the word “leadership,” a wide range of limiting beliefs pops up in response:

- “People like me don’t ______ (become leaders, organize change, step into high visibility positions, go on TV, run for office in professional associations, etc.).”
- “______ really pisses me off (but it’s easier to complain about it than create a solution and work for change).”
- “I’ll just take care of my own work and let the campus take care of itself.”
- “I’ll start working on ______ (something I care deeply about) when I’m ______ (a full professor, more experienced, financially independent, an empty nester and/or perfect in every way).”
- “If I put myself out there, I’ll be challenged and criticized, and I don’t want to deal with that.”
- “I’ll just keep doing of all of the things that nobody else wants to do.”
- “I don’t know how to ______ (organize change on campus, work with an agent, start consulting, become a dean) so I couldn’t possibly ______ (get what I desire).”

Do any of these sound familiar? If so, you’re perfectly normal. If not, they may stimulate your thinking about what (if any) limiting beliefs you have that keep you thinking small about your future, staying disempowered and remaining comfortable by pretending you’re not a powerful faculty member. The good news is that they are just limiting beliefs. By that I mean two things: 1) they are inherently limiting because they keep us from doing what we truly desire and 2) as beliefs, they are just stories that we tell ourselves to justify inaction. But they’re only stories, so they can quickly and easily be changed. I can’t say it strongly enough: if your internal story isn’t supporting your growth and evolution as a leader, it’s time for a new story.

**Asking the Big Question**

As important as it is to expand your understanding of leadership and surface your limiting beliefs, the most important question to ask is: Who do you think you are?

Whenever I ask this question, some people hear it as a genuine question, while others hear it as an overt challenge that is typically used to put someone who has crossed a boundary back in their place. Either way is fine, because it’s true that many faculty members got disconnected from the answer while they were on the tenure track, working so hard to meet external expectations for tenure. And it’s also true that when we start answering that question and experimenting with new ways of being on our campus and with our colleagues, we’re going to be shifting relational boundaries -- and we may face some pushback in doing so.

You may be wondering how people go about answering the big question. The short answer is: just like any other research project. They collect data, analyze the data for patterns and draw conclusions. Many books can brilliantly guide you through deep self-discovery, but if you’re short on time, my favorite exercises (from Barbara Sher’s *Wishcraft*) are:


Once you’ve completed those exercises, you can analyze your writing for patterns: What themes and commonalities do you see? What aspects of your ideal day and environment are indispensable, optional but desired, and pure frills? Which elements do you already have
and which are missing from a typical workday? Finally, ask yourself what is standing between you and having an ideal day or environment. And don't worry, these are just a few exercises to get you started -- we'll go a little deeper in next week's column.

The Weekly Challenge

This week, I challenge you to:

- Sit with your new reality and consider what it means to have power and be a leader on your campus.
- Notice if any disempowering thoughts or limiting beliefs come up for you.
- Set aside 30 minutes to journal about your ideal day and ideal environment
- Set aside a different time to reread your responses and analyze them.
- Notice what stories you tell yourself about why you can't have what you want (particularly regarding things that are under your control).

It may sound simple, but the moment you were officially awarded tenure was the moment you became a powerful leader on your campus. It's your choice to step into that role or not. But to be effective in that role, you must know who you are, what you love and what you stand for -- because the reality of working for change and enrolling others in your vision is that it takes focus, genuine passion and tenacious energy over time. And that is only possible if you are fully and completely clear about who you are, embrace the power you now have and focus on what matters.

Peace and possibilities,

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