Carefully assessing how you feel on a job gives you powerful feedback (essay)

Submitted by Kerry Ann Rockquemore on September 20, 2017 - 3:00am

The shift from assistant to associate professor -- and, more importantly, from untenured to tenured faculty member -- is a major transition. When done intentionally, it sets you up for success in the next chapter of your career. But when you proceed as if nothing has changed -- when you pile on work without a filter and are not grounded in who you are and what you love -- it’s a recipe for posttenure depression [1] and midcareer malaise [2].

To avoid negative outcomes, this 10-week series is designed to help newly tenured faculty make an intentional transition. We’ve spent the first few weeks pausing to reflect on some big questions: What has changed now that you have tenure? [3] What does it mean to be a leader on your campus? [4] What do you really want? [4]

The point of asking those questions is simple: they provide ways of generating data from multiple sources so you can answer the fundamental questions: Who am I and what do I love? You must be clear about the answers to these important questions as the foundation for choosing your posttenure pathway. Otherwise you will find yourself reactively responding to opportunities put in front of you instead of identifying a path that is aligned with your strengths. You will have the greatest influence and impact as a leader on your campus if you choose a posttenure pathway (instead of it being chosen for you) and if that choice comes from deep self-understanding and a spirit of contribution.

If you’ve been following along, you’ve asked your brain what you truly desire. (What is my ideal environment? What does an ideal day look like?) You’ve asked trusted friends and colleagues to serve as a mirror for you. (What are my strengths? What makes me unique? What do you think is my greatest passion?) You’ve asked your life to speak by looking at patterns across the previous chapters of your personal history. And this week we’re going to turn to one more source of wisdom for data collection: your body.

How Do You Feel?

I believe that your body is a powerful instrument for generating data about who you are and what you love. If you’re open to hearing the information your body gives you, then all you need to do is
ask yourself, “How do I feel?” It’s a simple question, but it provides powerful feedback about how you experience various aspects of your work. When you’re doing work that you are ill suited to, it’s normal to feel tired, cranky and as if time has slowed down to a nauseating crawl. By contrast, when you are doing work that maximizes your strengths and taps into your passion, it’s normal for your energy to be high, to feel fully stimulated and engaged, and to lose track of time and space.

While noticing how we feel sounds simple, it may require disrupting some typical patterns. In other words, it’s common for busy professionals to move through the day on autopilot, suppressing their physical and emotional states and staying disconnected from how they’re feeling. Many people just lock all that down, maintain a state of constant distraction and ingest various stimulants (coffee, Red Bull and so on) to get through the day.

By contrast, I want you to collect data from your body by raising your awareness and continually asking yourself, “How do I feel?” I’ve found that explicitly tracking it throughout the day heightens my awareness, reminds me to keep asking the question and allows me to document the answers. If you’re game for this experiment, why not try a few simple steps.

1. Identify what you will track. You can track your energy levels: Are they low, medium or high when you’re engaged in various activities? You can track how you’re feeling emotionally during specific activities: engaged, excited, frustrated, annoyed? (If you need to expand your framework and vocabulary for feelings to track this week, the Feelings Inventory [5] is a great tool.) You can also track your basic physical states: are you slouched or upright, at the edge of your seat or slumped in your chair? It doesn’t matter what you focus on. It just matters that you’re clear before you start what exactly you will track.

2. Track throughout the day. Tracking doesn’t have to be complex, involve learning a new app or require devising a complicated strategy. It can be as simple as putting a Post-it note on the back of your cell phone or carrying a piece of paper with you. All you need to do is notice how you feel as you are engaged in various activities and jot it down. I work in 30-minute sprints throughout the day, so I pause every 30 minutes, ask myself the question and record both the answer and what I’m doing.

3. Make an end-of-the-day summary. Pause at the end of each day you track to notice any patterns that have emerged. Are there certain types of activities that result in low energy and/or negative feelings? Are there other types of work that result in high energy and/or positive feelings? What do the low-energy activities have in common? What do the high-energy ones have in common? The more specific you can be, the deeper the insights you will generate.

This exercise is pivotal in our posttenure pathfinder program [6], because many participants are surprised by what they find. One faculty member (I’ll call her Jane) was surprised to find that she experienced the greatest joy, highest energy and deepest sense of meaning in teaching-related activities: being in the classroom, talking with students during office hours, preparing her classes and helping colleagues improve their teaching. It was a surprise because she had prioritized writing and publication while on the tenure track to meet the high expectations at her research-intensive university. Yet the times she felt bored, disengaged and uninspired were all associated with her research. I’m sharing Jane’s experience as a way to encourage you to be open to your own surprising insights.
Putting It All Together

Once you’ve collected five days of tracking your feelings and reflected on your patterns, you’ll be able to (literally) lay out all the data you’ve collected over the past four weeks, including:

- the list of things you wanted to do once you got tenure
- the list of 20 things you love to do
- your reflections on the posttenure pathways of people you admire
- the written responses from your trusted friends and colleagues about your strengths, uniqueness and passion
- your reflection on your past life chapters and your data from tracking how you feel throughout your workday.

Reread all the responses, insights, reflections and patterns that surfaced from asking your brain, your trusted assessors, your biography and your body. Then allow the true story of who you are and what you love to emerge. For some people, it’s a single word; for others, it’s a sentence; and for some, it starts with a paragraph. It doesn’t have to be perfect (we’ll work to refine it over time), and don’t be surprised if it brings up mixed feelings.

For example, when Jane put all her data together, what emerged was an image: “super teacher.” In the midst of her pile of data, she saw a superhero who went around dressing the part of “serious researcher” but underneath wore a bright-blue suit and cape. At certain times, she could reveal and use her superpowers, but most of the time she was covering them up because they weren’t valued on her campus.

This image brought a mix of emotions, because while it rang true to her, she didn’t know what to do with the discovery that her true self didn’t fit the mold of what her university values, rewards and wants her to be. And she couldn’t imagine what possibilities existed for a posttenure pathway with this new self-understanding. I’ll share how Jane resolved this in the coming weeks as we get farther into the process.

The Weekly Challenge

This week, I challenge you to:

- Track how you feel during your workday this week and pull out the patterns.
- Lay out all of the data you’ve collected over the past four weeks.
- Reread your documents and see what and who emerges.
- Write out your answer to the questions: Who am I? What do I love?
- If you’re resistant to answering these questions, gently ask yourself: Why?

We’re collecting all of this information so that you can get clear about who you are (that’s the center out of which you can operate) and what you love (which will give it a direction). Once you have that clarity, we can start mapping your specific possibilities next week.

Peace and possibilities,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, Ph.D.
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Founder, National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity [8]


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