This term, I’m focusing on the most common mistakes that new faculty members make. I learned last week that there are a whole lot of folks Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places! And that’s OK, because the purpose of pointing out the most common errors is to become aware of them, consider alternative strategies, and make changes that will move you closer to the goal of winning tenure and promotion.

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Get Out There & Shake It!

Folks:

The posting below talks about the importance of new faculty being proactive in their relationships with colleagues. It is by Kerry Ann Rockquemore*, PhD, president and CEO of the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity [http://www.facultydiversity.org/] It is from the posting of February 9, 2015 in her Monday Motivator series about which you can find out more at: http://www.facultydiversity.org/?page=MondayMotivator.

Regards,

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Get Out There & Shake It!

This term, I’m focusing on the most common mistakes that new faculty members make. I learned last week that there are a whole lot of folks Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places! And that’s OK, because the purpose of pointing out the most common errors is to become aware of them, consider alternative strategies, and make changes that will move you closer to the goal of winning tenure and promotion. In the spirit of progress toward positive change, let’s move on to Mistake #5: Being reactive (instead of proactive) in your professional relationships.

In a perfect world, new faculty members would be warmly welcomed into their departments and actively nurtured by enthusiastic mentors. Colleagues would ask you to lunch, offer to read your work, initiate stimulating conversations, notice your stress, become your mentor, and offer to collaborate on projects. In short, you would be embraced and supported by members of a vibrant intellectual community so that your transition from graduate student to professor would be efficient and effective.

Unfortunately, most academic departments are far from perfect! So if you passively wait for others to initiate interaction, you are likely to be sitting in your office alone and isolated a great deal of the time. It is also the case that when you don’t extend yourself, others may negatively perceive you as aloof, disengaged, or un-collegial. Most importantly, you may be missing out on important relationships, access to critical networks, professional opportunities, and the mentoring you need to thrive.

To be clear, new faculty members should not be single-handedly responsible for initiating relationships and integrating themselves into their new departments. But this is often the reality, especially for women in mostly male departments, and faculty of color in predominantly white departments. If this is your situation, you cannot sit back and reactively wait for senior faculty (who will be voting on your tenure and promotion) to reach out to you and include you in their networks and activities. Instead, your goal should be to proactively initiate relationships with your senior colleagues so that you are spending time each week discussing research and/or teaching with them.

Moving from a Reactive to a Proactive Stance in Your Professional Relationships

For me, moving from a reactive to proactive stance was one of the most difficult challenges of life on the tenure-track. I was that new faculty member sitting in my office, waiting for the welcome wagon to arrive, and indignant when an entire semester had gone by without a single invitation to lunch or coffee. When I complained to one of my mentors, his advice to me was: "get out there and shake it!"

Needless to say, I was horrified (at multiple levels). But I had to ask myself why -- as a generally outgoing person -- was I finding it so incredibly difficult to initiate relationships with my colleagues? I realized that: 1) I thought it was their responsibility to initiate a relationship with me, and 2) it's hard for me to connect with people who are inter-personally awkward, unpleasant, cranky, salty, don't share my politics, and/or made it clear that they didn't want me hired in the first place. Acknowledging the problem was half the battle, but let me share with you how I moved from weeping quietly in my office to "out there shaking it".

1) Adjust Expectations

While it should not have been solely my responsibility to build relationships with my senior colleagues, that was my departmental reality. So recognize the reality of YOUR environment
(whatever that may be), and go ahead and take the first step in establishing professional relationships. I realized I didn't have to like everyone, but these were my colleagues, and it was critically important for me to be proactive in developing positive and healthy professional relationships with them.

2) Ask Someone to Lunch

One of my mentors advised me to invite one person per week to lunch during the following semester. If lunch feels like too big of a commitment, then try coffee. If you can't even fathom the idea of coffee with a crusty colleague, then promise yourself you will linger for five minutes in their doorway and have a focused conversation. This will get easier each time you do it, and you can build from doorway to coffee, and coffee to lunch, over time.

3) Ask People for Advice

The easiest conversation starter is to ask someone for their advice. It could be something general or something quite specific, but it should be about research or teaching. People love to give advice to pre-tenure faculty, and it creates a foundation for you to seek out their counsel later on when you have bigger problems and don't know how to resolve them. Asking for advice does NOT communicate weakness or incompetence; it communicates professionalism and a desire to establish a mentoring relationship with the person you're asking.

4) Talk about Your Research

For me, lunch and coffee dates became wonderful opportunities to talk about my research. By letting my colleagues know what projects I was working on, what conceptual or methodological problems I was having, and where I hoped to go in the future, I was "networking." The purpose of networking is connecting people, ideas and opportunities. If your colleagues don't know what you're doing and/or what you need, it's difficult for them to connect with you, and connect you with others. This is far more productive than using your brief time together to complain, gossip, cry, discuss personal problems, or talk about departmental politics. Keep the initial conversations focused on your work and keep in mind that ALL your colleagues (even the ones you don't like up front) can have important and helpful things to say about your research.

5) Open Yourself to Others

I learned that everyone is in my life for a purpose and has a tremendous gift to share with me. My job is to open up to them so I can receive their gift. You may think: why should I waste time chatting with some non-research-active senior colleague who can't possibly relate to the ever-escalating demands of today's tenure track? Stop and remind yourself that he/she will be voting on your tenure. Then approach that conversation with a true sense of curiosity by asking: Why is this person in my life and what can I learn from him/her? When I move towards my colleagues in a spirit of openness and hopeful expectation, it shifts the energy of the interaction, and I am often delightfully surprised by the gifts they offer me.

Each of these steps helped me move from a reactive stance (waiting for my colleagues to establish relationships with me) to a proactive stance where I initiate contact, shape my relationships, ask for what I need, and focus the interactions on what matters. Using your personal power to move forward in this way will help you feel more connected to others in your department, open networks of opportunity, and help to solidify your professional relationships. And the more comfortable you are having substantive conversations with your campus colleagues, the easier it will be when you are at conferences, meetings, and workshops.
The Weekly Challenge

This week I challenge you to:

Assess your stance towards your colleagues by gently asking yourself: am I proactive or reactive in my professional relationships?

If you are being proactive, then congratulate yourself on being ahead of the game!

If you are reactive, pick one thing you can do to change your stance (i.e., invite someone to lunch, initiate a conversation, or stop by and chat).

Whatever you pick, commit to executing that behavioral change this week.

If you experience resistance to taking the first step with some of your colleagues, patiently ask yourself WHY?

If you haven't completed your semester/quarter plan, it's not too late! In fact, sharing your semester plan with a colleague is an easy way to start a conversation.

Write every day for at least 30 minutes. Daily writing will lead you be more productive and confident as a scholar, teacher, and colleague AND provide you with substantive issues to talk about every single day.

I hope that this week brings each of you the desire to analyze your relationship patterns with your colleagues, the courage to make positive change, and the true sense of empowerment that comes from stepping outside of your comfort zone.

Peace & Productivity,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, PhD
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