Department Chair Online Resource Center

Understanding the Challenges of Department Chairs

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Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there.
— Will Rogers

THE CALL FOR LEADERSHIP

The position of department chair is one of leadership, charged with the challenges of developing the department's future and of building faculty vitality. As we move into the new millennium, we face a time of major change for the over 3,000 universities and colleges in the United States. Changing student clientele, disintegrating college curricula, growing technological changes, and shifting attitudes and practices of faculty represent some of the many forces currently shaping higher education.

Change is inevitable. But the critical question is how well chairs and departments prepare for it and position themselves to survive and succeed. Your success in these changing times requires a clear sense of the future (a focus on what your department can become) and the personal leadership skills to shape the future (what type of leader you can become). Anticipating your changing environments, developing a future-oriented statement of department mission, and providing leadership to unify department activity toward a "planned" future is the mark of effective academic leaders. Dean Rom Markin of the College of Business and Economics at Washington State University gives emphasis to this leadership challenge:

> Truly successful people learn that managing change is an exercise in self mastery. They also learn that self mastery comes about by a process of personal and professional growth which embraces ready acceptance of new knowledge and a desire to always be a student, open and seeking information. Such people know that the illiterate are not those who can't read or write, but those who stop learning. Those who manage change well are those who have high expectations and are optimistic about succeeding—attitudes proven to be positive elements of success. Finally, survivors and successful managers of change are always creating alternative futures, contingency plans, rainy day funds, and other strategies that assure survival. In times of descent as well as ascent, it's always well to revisit the personal or professional mission statement. (1992, p. 1)

The time of "amateur administration" where professors temporarily step into the administrative role of department chair has lost its effectiveness. The call for leadership is real. Department chairs are critical to the future of the college, department, and faculty.

This chapter addresses the why, what, and how of the leadership call. In essence, it attempts to answer three basic questions: (1) Why become a department chair? (2) What do department chairs do? and (3) How can you become an effective chair? Chapter Two then completes this leadership question with a discussion of developing your department into an academic team.

WHY BE A DEPARTMENT CHAIR?

Given the complications and ambiguities of the chair position, why do faculty members choose to serve in this capacity? What are the real motives faculty members have for accepting the position, and does this motivation affect their willingness to be a leader?

As you examine your own motives, it may help to see responses from others concerning their decision to become department chairs. Three studies conducted by the Center for the Study of the Department Chair at Washington State University, using both interviews and surveys, may give insight into how this decision is made and how it affects the leadership role (see preface). When chairs across the United States were asked what motivated them to become department chairs, they basically responded in two ways.

EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Some chairs chose to serve for extrinsic reasons: their dean or colleagues convinced them to take the job or they felt forced to take it because no one else was willing to take on the responsibility or could do the job properly. Typical extrinsically motivated individuals indicated that they were requested to, told to, or approached by the dean. One chair said: "Temporary insanity (only kidding); the dean approached me—said he thought I had a lot of skills that were needed and that I could do a good job" (Seedorf, 1990). Other chairs were persuaded by their peers because "no one else had a suitable combination of seniority, respect, and personality." Some chairs took the position because they felt that they could do a better job than other faculty: "No one who would be a good chair was interested," or "None of those who were interested were, in my opinion, capable of being a good chair—I was scared to death of the alternative!"

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

In contrast, many chairs sought the position for intrinsic reasons: they saw it as an opportunity to help either the department or themselves. Those who expressed the altruistic need to help the department stated that they "desired to help other faculty members," "wanted to build a strong academic department," or "needed to help develop a new program in the department." Others who were more motivated by personal reasons sought the chair position because they "needed a challenge," "required the financial gain (if there really is any!)," "desired to try something new…in addition to teaching and research," "wanted administrative experience in order to take the next step in the career ladder" or simply "wanted to be in more control of (their) environment."

Does the initial motivation affect the chair's ability or willingness to serve? In the national survey, hundreds of chairs answered the following two questions: (1) What was your motivation to serve? and (2) Are you willing to serve more than one term? The results, reported in Table 1.1, indicate that chairs most frequently served for personal development reasons (321 chairs or 60 percent). However, 251 or 46.8 percent of the chairs said they also were drafted by their dean or colleagues. These were the two most frequent reasons for serving as department chair, the first represents an intrinsic motivation to serve and the latter an extrinsic motivation.

TABLE 1.1 WHY FACULTY BECAME DEPARTMENT CHAIRS

Reason for Serving	No. Chairs
1. For personal development (interesting challenge, new opportunities)	321
2. Drafted by the dean or my colleagues	251
3. Out of necessity (lack of alternative candidates)	196
4. To be more in control of my environment	161
5. Out of sense of duty, it was my turn	133
6. For financial gain	117
7. An opportunity to relocate at new institution	101

Source: Center for the Study of the Department Chair, Washington State University, 1992.

In response to the second question, 46 percent of the chairs indicated a willingness to serve another term as chair, 30 percent said they would not, and 24 percent were still undecided (Figure 1.1). What is interesting is that those who agreed to serve primarily for extrinsic reasons were the least likely to serve another term (only 25 percent, see Figure 1.2). In contrast, three-quarters (75 percent) of the intrinsically motivated chairs were willing to serve again (Figure 1.3). These results demonstrate that by a three-to-one margin, those most willing to continue in the chair position had taken the position for personal-intrinsic reasons.

Regardless of your initial reasons for agreeing to serve as chair, your current motivation and commitment to continue in administration will influence your ability to develop leadership capacity. Reflect for a moment and indicate in Exercise 1.1 the primary reasons you became a department chair.

EXERCISE 1.1

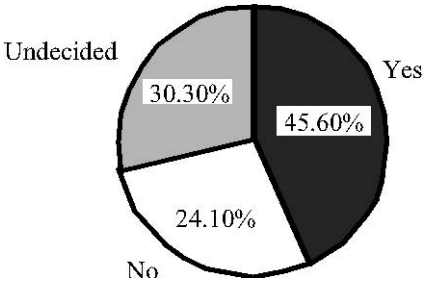
Why Be a Department Chair?

Indicate below the reasons why you became department chair. You may check more than one.

1. For personal development (challenge, new opportunities)
2. To be in more control of my environment
3. For financial gain
4. Drafted by the dean or my colleagues
5. Out of a sense of duty, it was my turn
6. Out of necessity (lack of alternative candidate)

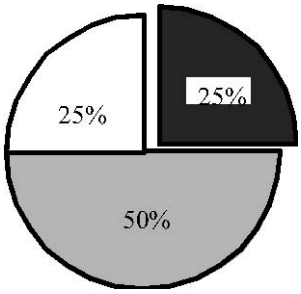
Now compare your responses with those of other chairs in Table 1.1.

FIGURE 1.1 CHAIRS' WILLINGNESS TO SERVE ANOTHER TERM



Source: Center for the Study of the Department Chair, Washington State University, 1990.

FIGURE 1.2 CHAIRS MOTIVATED BY EXTRINSIC REASONS



Source: Center for the Study of the Department Chair, Washington State University, 1990.

With the leadership crisis which currently exists in higher education, it is critical for department chairs to answer this leadership call. There needs to be continuity in the chair position, not just taking one's "turn." The position of department chair is too critical to the effectiveness of the institution, the faculty, the community, and to you personally to serve solely from a sense of duty. Your sense of duty must be combined with a real interest and commitment to the position and its challenges and responsibilities.

WHAT DO CHAIRS DO?

No doubt you keep busy as department chair. Endless meetings, stacks of paperwork, constant interruptions, and fragmented encounters on a multitude of topics set a frantic pace. But to what end? All the memos, meetings, phone calls, drop-in visitors and confrontations represent means, but do these activities produce the desired ends?

You must understand that effective chairs influence the future of their departments. It is the focus on results that successfully moves departments through these changing times. Virtually every managerial book written lists and exalts the tasks, duties, roles, and responsibilities of administrators, from the traditional Peter Drucker approach of planning, organizing, staffing, delegating and controlling, to Warren Bennis's four elements of transformational leadership: attention through vision, meaning through communication, trust through positioning, and the deployment of self (Bennis and Nanus, 1985).

Lists specific to department chair duties range from the exhaustive listing of 97 activities discovered by a University of Nebraska research team (Creswell, et al., 1990), or the astonishing 54 varieties of tasks and duties cited in Allan Tucker's classic book *Chairing the Academic Department* (1992), or the 40 functions forwarded in a study of Australian department chairs (Moses and Roe, 1990). The genesis of these lists can be traced back to Siever's 12 functions, expanded to 18 by McCarthy, reduced to 15 by Hoyt, and expanded again to 27 by Smart and Elton (Moses and Roe, 1990).

Typical faculty manuals at most colleges and universities provide a list of the chairs' duties and responsibilities, such as organizing and supervising curriculum, distributing teaching research loads, supervising department funds, recommending promotions and salaries, and so on. Check your college manual for your own local listings! While these numerous lists appear refined and comprehensive, they continue to represent fragmented activities without focus on the bottom line—the results.

THE FOUR ROLES OF DEPARTMENT CHAIRS

What roles are critical for department chairs to achieve results? In answer to this question, four main department chair roles emerge from the popular literature and converge with current research: the Faculty Developer, Manager, Leader, and Scholar.

The role of *Faculty Developer* is viewed by department chairs as their most important responsibility. This involves the tasks of the recruitment, selection, and evaluation of faculty as well as providing the informal leadership to enhance faculty morale and their professional development.

Acting as a *Manager*, the second role, is a requirement of the position, but often least liked by chairs (McLaughlin et al., 1975). Chairs spend over half their week in department activities. Specifically, they perform maintenance functions of preparing budgets, maintaining department records, assigning duties to faculty, supervising non-academic staff, and maintaining finances, facilities, and equipment.

Leader best describes the third role of department chairs. As leaders of their department they provide long-term direction and vision for the department, solicit ideas to improve the department, plan and evaluate curriculum development, and plan and conduct departmental meetings. They also provide the external leadership for their departments by working with their constituents to coordinate department activities, represent the department at professional meetings, and, on behalf of the department, participate in college and university committees to keep faculty informed of external concerns. Chairs seem to like this role because of opportunities to help others develop professional skills, to have a challenging job, and to influence the profession and department. And those chairs who enjoy these leadership activities spend more time performing them—not a surprising revelation (McLaughlin et al., 1975)! It is our hope that not only do department chairs enjoy this role, but that they take it most seriously when assuming their administrative position. Since it is the most critical role to achieve success, the entire second section of this book is devoted to this call to leadership.

In contrast to the managerial nature of the three previous department chair roles, a chair also tries to remain a *Scholar* while serving as chair. This role includes the continuing need to teach and keep current in their academic discipline and, for those in research universities, maintain an active research program and obtain grants to support their research. Chairs enjoy and feel most comfortable in this role (McLaughlin et al., 1975), but express frustration in their inability to spend much time with their academic interests. Many would spend more time on their own academic activities if they could, but find it virtually impossible. In fact, 86 percent of department chairs significantly reduce their scholarly activities while serving as chair, and for some their scholarship virtually ceases.

Where do your primary interests lie? Exercise 1.2 enables you to assess the degree to which you feel each of these four department chair roles is important to you in your current position. In order to obtain a sense of identity, reflect for a moment on how you ranked the four roles, then look within each role and identify the most important tasks you perform to obtain your results. Is your perception in line with the reality of obtaining results in your job? You may have to realign some of your time and

energies to maximize your results. These adjustments should be made consciously as you assume the administrative role of department chair. The transition from the professorial role to that of department chair is vital to your success.

HOW CAN YOU BE AN EFFECTIVE CHAIR?

While it would be convenient to move immediately into your leadership role, the transformation from professor to chair takes time and dedication. Not all chairs make the complete transition to leadership. They try to maintain their faculty responsibilities during their time in office and engage in both types of work simultaneously, resulting in what one researcher described as: "the work of administration and the work of the professor do not make good bedfellows.…The nature of administrative work is varied, brief and fragmented and, therefore, the administrator cannot devote long periods of uninterrupted time to single issues. The nature of professorial work demands long periods of time to concentrate on issues, to write and see a work through to publication, and to prepare to teach, and evaluate classes" (Seedorf, 1990, pp. 122–123). Therefore, you must let go of your previous professorial role, at least in part, in order to successfully make this transition. This underscores the importance of wanting to serve for the right reasons. Intrinsic motivation may indeed be a prerequisite to accepting the leadership challenge.

EXERCISE 1.2

Department Chair Role

A. Listed below are 24 typical duties of department chairs. Please answer the following questions for each of the duties listed.

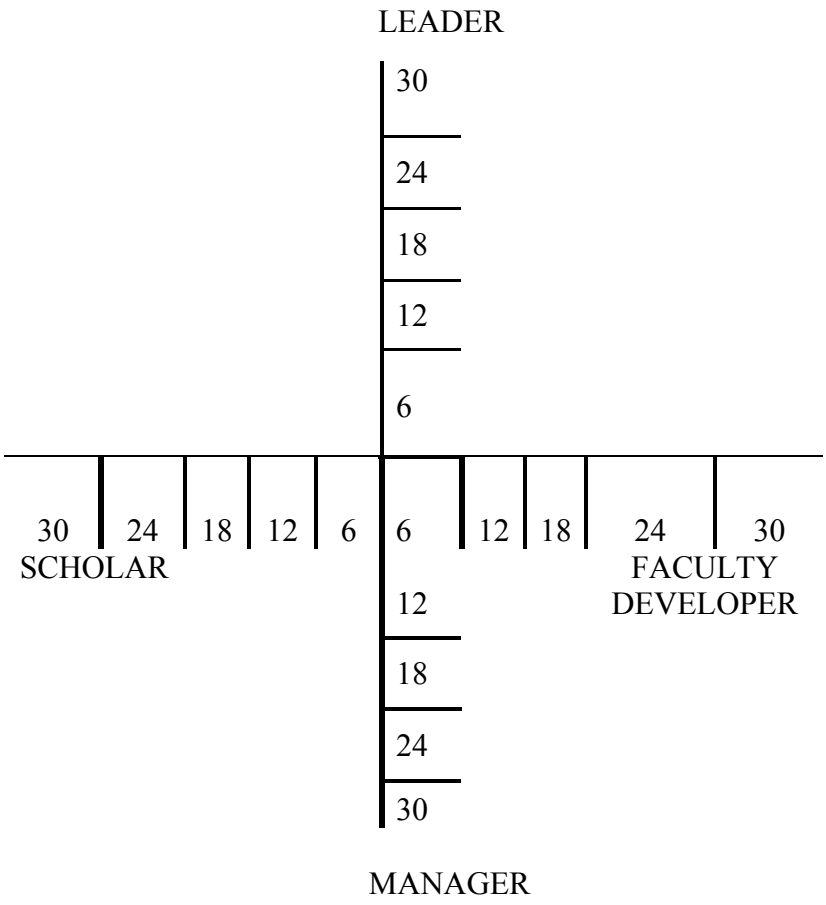
Chair Role	**How important to you is each chair duty?**				
	Low				**High**
Leader					
•Coordinate departmental activities with constituents	1	2	3	4	5
•Plan and evaluate curriculum development	1	2	3	4	5
•Solicit ideas to improve the department	1	2	3	4	5
•Represent the department at professional meetings	1	2	3	4	5
•Provide informal faculty leadership	1	2	3	4	5
•Develop and initiate long-range vision and departmental goals	1	2	3	4	5

Chair Role	How important to you is each chair duty? Low High				
Scholar					
•Obtain resources for personal research	1	2	3	4	5
•Maintain research program and associated professional activities	1	2	3	4	5
•Remain current within academic discipline	1	2	3	4	5
•Obtain and manage external funds (grants, contracts)	1	2	3	4	5
•Select and supervise graduate students	1	2	3	4	5
•Teach and advise students	1	2	3	4	5
Faculty Developer					
•Encourage professional development efforts of faculty	1	2	3	4	5
•Encourage faculty research and publication	1	2	3	4	5
•Recruit and select faculty	1	2	3	4	5
•Maintain productive work climate, including reducing conflicts	1	2	3	4	5
•Evaluate faculty performance	1	2	3	4	5
•Represent department to administration	1	2	3	4	5
Manager					
•Prepare and propose budgets	1	2	3	4	5
•Plan and conduct department meetings	1	2	3	4	5
•Manage department resources (finances, facilities, equipment)	1	2	3	4	5
•Assure the maintenance of accurate department records	1	2	3	4	5
•Manage non-academic staff	1	2	3	4	5
•Assign teaching, research, and other related duties to faculty	1	2	3	4	5

Department Chair Role Orientation Scoring

The Department Chair Orientation instrument is keyed to four different roles department chairs perform.

B. Add your total score for each role. Plot your scores on the appropriate axes below, then connect the points with straight lines to get a visual representation of your dominant and back-up chair orientations.



TRANSITIONS TO LEADERSHIP

The drastic differences between the two roles of scholar and administrator help explain the difficulty in making the transition to department chair. As this transformation, aptly termed the "metamorphosis of the department chair" takes place, several of your "faculty" functions and work habits change into "chair" work styles (Gmelch and Seedorf, 1989). These new chair work styles are much different from what you were used to as a faculty member and will take some adjustment. The following list outlines nine transitions you face when moving from a faculty position to department chair.

1. *From solitary to social*. College professors typically work alone on research, teaching preparation, and projects. Now, as chair, your responsibility forces you to work with and through others. For example, department goals cannot be achieved alone, they must be achieved in concert with your faculty.

2. *From focused to fragmented.* While professors must have long, uninterrupted periods to work on scholarly pursuits, your work as department chair, like other management positions, is characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation.

3. *From autonomy to accountability*. Professors generally enjoy control over their time and the feeling of autonomy over activity and movement in their working environment. As you move from your role of professor to administrator, you tend to lose this sense of autonomy and become accountable to upper administration and the faculty for your time and accessibility in the office, as well as for your actions and activities.

4. *From manuscripts to memoranda.* The scholar and researcher labors over a manuscript for a long period of time. Before finding printer's ink, the work goes through many revisions and critiques. As department chair, you quickly must learn the art of persuasion and precision through memos. Thus, chairs report less stress from manuscripts and more from completing paperwork on time (see Chapter 7).

5. *From private to public*. The professor may block out long periods of time for scholarly work, but as chair you have an obligation to be accessible throughout the day to the many publics you serve. In essence, you move from the privilege of a "closed door" to the obligation of an "open door" policy.

6. *From professing to persuading.* In the academic profession, the professor is disseminating information in a manner that will meet the learning objectives of others. As you turn from professor into chair, you profess less and practice more the art of persuasion and compromise.

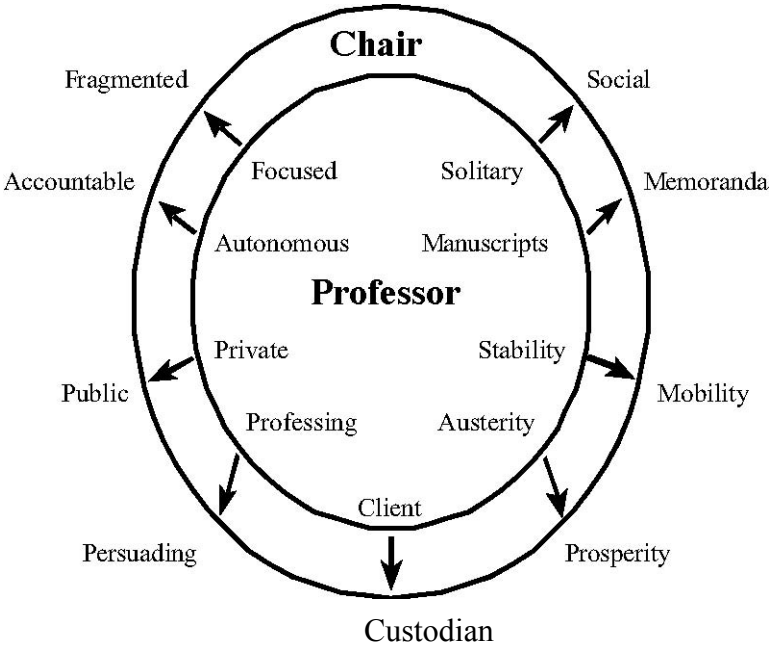
7. *From stability to mobility.* While always growing and exploring new concepts and ideas, faculty generally experience movement within the stability of their discipline and circle of professional associations. As a chair, you also attempt to retain your professional identity but must become mobile within the university structure. In order to be at the cutting edge of educational reform and implement needed programmatic changes within, you must be more mobile, visible, and political.

8. *From client to custodian*. In relation to university resources, the professor is a client, requesting and expecting resources to be available to conduct research, classes, and service activities. As chair, you represent the custodian and dispenser of resources and are responsible for the maintenance of the physical setting as well as providing material and monetary resources.

9. *From austerity to prosperity*. While in actuality the pay differential between professor and chair may not be significant, the perception of more control over departmental resources creates the illusion of greater prosperity as chair.

Rather than listing these transitions in a table, visualize in Figure 1.4 the professor at the inner core of a set of concentric circles. The professor is characterized in this inner circle as focused, autonomous, private, stable, solitary, austere, and a client of the department. The metamorphosis transforms these professorial inner traits into an other-oriented (outer circle), creating an administrative profile of social, fragmented, accountable, public, mobile, prosperous, and custodial. These outwardly expanding circles represent the types of transitions needed to successfully move from a faculty member to administrative responsibility and challenge. You must recognize the fundamental differences between the roles of academic professor and department chair.

FIGURE 1.4 THE TRANSFORMATION FROM PROFESSOR TO CHAIR



ARE YOU READY FOR DEPARTMENT LEADERSHIP?

Leading with Diversity

We are now a part of a new management era with more women in upper levels of corporations and higher education (Naisbitt and Aburdene, 1990). For example, in doctorate-granting institutions today, about 10 percent of the department chairs are female. Twenty years ago when most of these women

were receiving their doctorates, only 13 percent of the doctorates were being granted to women. In contrast, currently 37 percent of doctorates are granted to women (Bowen and Schuster, 1986), which implies that the percentage of female department chairs will increase as this group of graduates accept leadership positions in institutions of higher education.

Understanding the value of gender and diversity in higher education is of growing importance. To explain the intricacies and complexity of diversity in organizations requires a theory and vocabulary. For example, Rosabeth Moss Kanter's book, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1977), sheds light on the significance numbers play in leadership. As it applies to institutions of higher education, group dynamics is influenced by the proportional representation of different kinds of faculty or chairs in a

meeting, whether it be by gender, race, ethnicity, or any other significant influence. For example, "uniform" groups have only one kind of person and are considered homogeneous with respect to salient status such as race, gender, or ethnicity. This homogeneously significant type, called "dominant," controls the group or department and its culture. At the other extreme, "skewed" departments occur when there is a preponderance of one type over another. The minority in a skewed group, called "tokens," are often treated as representatives of their category; as symbols rather than individuals. Even if a college or division has more than one token in a skewed department (for example, women and minorities), it is difficult for them to generate an alliance or to gain power positions in the department.

However, the importance in having diverse participation in groups is not so much in the numbers or proportions they represent, but the perspective they bring to the events (Dillard, 1992). Diverse representation in department chair positions not only provides important role models but introduces broader variety in management styles to accommodate more diverse perspectives. A true team climate is based on multiple perspectives.

Leadership Self-Assessment

Regardless of gender, minority status, or ethnic heritage, improving your leadership capacity will:

- Show that you value diversity in experience and talent;
- Encourage staff to participate and satisfy their interests; and
- Build a collective team climate.

An honest self-appraisal of your management style can be most beneficial in assessing how ready you are for this leadership challenge. Rate yourself on the items in Exercise 1.3. Express your current attitudes toward openness, recognition, diverse perspectives, and faculty development, and you will discover your readiness to enjoy your role as department chair. These ratings give an overall indication of your willingness to accept leadership responsibilities while maintaining the respect of your faculty members.

Calculate your score by adding the total items checked in each of the four columns. Then multiply the first column total by 1, the total of column two by 2, column three by 3, and the last column to the right by 4. Adding these new totals together will give you your "department leadership" score.

If you score below 25, you may want to set some specific improvement goals for yourself. A score of 35 or above indicates a strong foundation for guiding your faculty's and department's vitality. You are now on your way to answering the call to leadership.

EXERCISE 1.3 DEPARTMENT LEADERSHIP SELF-ASSESSMENT

Required Leadership Behaviors	Not Really	Could Use Improve-ment	Partially True	Very True
A. Able to show visible enthusiasm for almost all duties of the department chair.				
B. Willing to put in significant extra time if necessary to prepare for an upcoming faculty meeting.				
C. Able to put in considerably more work than other faculty members without feeling resentment.				
D. Able to direct attention and efforts toward department goals even at the expense of your own personal interests.				
E. Able to recognize the benefit of diverse perspectives and participation even if it means increased conflict.				
F. Able to give direction when needed without taking over (dominating) the functions of the staff.				
G. Willing to give attention and praise to all faculty members whenever they are deserving.				
H. Concerned with each faculty member's current abilities, goals, and attitudes toward department success.				
I. Willing to rely on the achievements of faculty for your own recognition from higher management.				
J. Able to guide all faculty members effectively in new areas.				
SUBTOTAL				
	(x1)	(x2)	(x3)	(x4)
Total department leadership score				