



## FORWARD, TOGETHER

The *best* thing about working at a university is that it's full of really smart people.

The *worst* thing about working at a university is that it's full of really smart people.

The academy is brimming with professionals whose expertise, experience, and expectations positively shape governance processes. Things sometimes get dicey, however, when multiple members of multiple constituencies offer multiple perspectives grounded in their multiple expertises, experiences, and expectations. A shared challenge often evokes manifold solutions, many with great merit.

Conflict isn't just possible: It's inevitable.

From there, we sometimes get bogged down in process, slow to identify the actions needed to move the organization in a new direction. And in an era of changing student demographics, challenging finances, and difficult choices, managing conflict becomes vital, lest we be crippled by it.

How might we address the tensions that hamper progress?

First, seek a mutual commitment to being unflinchingly solution-focused. Rather than dwelling on how things used to be (a common trope of conflict-laden conversations), get everybody

talking about an improved future and keep folks accountable for maintaining a forward-looking orientation.

Second, don't be conflict averse. Acknowledge up front that creative thinkers will present multiple perspectives, which may give rise to disagreement. Moreover, not every good idea can be adopted, so egos may be bruised. That's to be expected. So agree to disagree, but in a healthy way: no shaming, blaming, or demonizing.

Third, eschew oversimplifying. Institutional challenges are typically complex, thereby requiring multifaceted responses. At many state-sponsored institutions, one often hears a version of this solution: "We'd be fine if the legislature just appropriated more funds." As the provost at such an institution, I'm all for increased state support (hint, hint), but I also acknowledge the improbability of the same without very different prioritizing beyond my influence or control.

Which leads to point four: Accept that there are no perfect solutions. No silver bullets. No making everybody happy. Rather, strive for an *optimal* solution, one that represents today's best path toward positive outcomes for the institution. Discerning an optimal solution requires that we identify the circumstances and constraints

under which we currently operate and then agree upon those priorities that best serve our collective best future interests, e.g., doing right by the students we teach today. Agree that whatever worked "back in the day" isn't likely to work going forward. Acknowledge any new normal, welcome all necessary change, and review point number one (above).

Finally, establish who is responsible for which decisions. While shared governance calls for broad participation in important academic conversations, there is typically a sole decider, one party held accountable for what is to be done. Sometimes the toughest part of a difficult conversation happens at the end of the process, when participants must set aside egos and biases to implement the established plan. Only by agreeing to set aside conflict in service to the ultimate best interests of the institution and its students can we effectively move forward, together.

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