

Quick Tips

Working with your Chair

By Esther Choo, MD, MPH

I attended a "Career Success" panel at Brown University that included a "working with your chair" session. Below are a few tips I learned, in no particular order:

- There is no "typical" path to academic success -- make an individualized plan for yourself.
- "Lean in" / "step up"- consider leadership roles and how they can be modified to fit your life - don't assume that home responsibilities, etc., make you ineligible.
- Take advantage of leadership training & skills development programs so when leadership opportunities arise, you are ready.
- Clarify with your supervisor: What are the metrics of success? (that determine promotion, raise, bonus, etc.)
- Come into a negotiation with as much objective data as possible, and with common goals; frame your goals around shared goals.
- Make your boss / your mentor your collaborator in your success.
- Do not feel guilty about taking advantage of benefits available to you (paid leave, etc.) - they are there for you.
- Have the courage to call out bias when you see it (can be tough when you are the only one of your subgroup).
- Use your usual personality style to approach topics needing change - collaboration, humor, etc. Stay positive and constructive. Aggressive techniques may backfire.
- Have a well crafted, short answer prepared for the question "What are your career goals?"
- Learn how to say no EARLY so you don't disappoint by not following through, but if you make a commitment, honor it.
- Note upcoming "silver tsunamis" at your institution - a good opportunity to consider what leadership roles may work for you.
- DON'T WAIT until there's a CRISIS to meet with your chair; they will start to dread when you set up a meeting. Have a regular, productive, SHORT meeting that is just a check-in.
- Don't assume your chair knows what's going on with you. Keep them updated so that you can come to mind when opportunities arise.
- Arrive prepared: consider bringing handouts or a list of to-do items.
- Make sure your chair knows about your accomplishments, but be sure to make your needs clear as well.
- Things you can ask for: title, money, space, time (title is the easiest).
- When asking for money, be specific. Lay out aims and determine metrics for successful use of the money; set times for reevaluation and re-funding rather than whole lump sum at once. Evaluate where your salary is compared to what your activities are. Recognize that everybody is asking for more money.
- Think of your space needs early. This requires planning. For grants, space should be commensurate with indirects, otherwise, be flexible and consider creative solutions.
- Time: The way you spend your time and distribute your effort may change incrementally over time. Always think of this balance, and work on it. Do NOT feel guilty about discharging roles that you picked up early on that no longer fit with your interests and goals. Transition these to junior faculty.
- The chair/vice chair's perspective: Is this a selfish request or does it serve the department's needs? Will the resources benefit the individual only or the whole group? What proportion of total resources will this request take up? Has this faculty member delivered in the past?
- Be mindful that resources are limited. Be realistic and acknowledge the constraints.
- Go in with one main agenda item - you can't negotiate the kitchen sink.
- Be prepared to negotiate. Know what is ideal and what you can jettison. Be transparent about this; don't make requests all or nothing and don't give up if the first answer is no.
- DON'T WHINE -- have a plan, not just a problem.
- DON'T WHINE -- this was said multiple times in many ways. Seems to be a pet peeve of division heads and chairs.
- Express appreciation when you do get what you want.
- Follow up meetings with a brief email summarizing action items.
- Follow up with your successes, how you have followed through.
- As a department - think of how resources are distributed fairly.
- What does the department need from its faculty? Be a partner in the success of the department. Be a risk taker, an early adopter. Come with solution or options, be a problem solver. Know how you are supposed to be productive and demonstrate productivity in that realm.
- Don't internalize the "no"s - it's not about you! It's usually about other constraints. Be resilient. Think of it like a journal or grant rejection, consider it a no for NOW, maybe a yes later.
- If your chair is aware of your goals and responsibilities, it is easier to have a conversation about not accepting additional / irrelevant commitments.

The most difficult thing in any negotiation, almost, is making sure that you strip it of the emotion and deal with the facts.

Howard Baker