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# STAFF PAPER

THE ROLE OF THE UNIT ADMINISTRATOR:  
ROLES, POWERS, AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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JUNE 1991

No. 91-21

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## THE ROLE OF THE UNIT ADMINISTRATOR:

### ROLES, POWERS, AND RESPONSIBILITIES\*

MARC A. JOHNSON\*

First, I want to assure you that your role as a unit administrator is vital in your organization. Periodically, I have experienced an identity crisis in which I ask "What have I done this year? What difference do I make?" We have a very productive faculty who, for the most part, run their own shows. It took service on several SRS review teams for me to see what difference a unit head makes. I have seen departments that had selected unit heads just recently, following long periods with acting heads who lacked a long-term mandate. During the few years without unit heads, these departments experienced declines in productivity and reputation. Unit heads provide the focus and the expectation to make a unit work. Without a conductor, an orchestra of fine musicians cannot make music. Today, I will address responsibilities of a unit head, the roles they play to accomplish these responsibilities, and the powers at hand to carry out these roles.

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THE ROLE OF THE UNIT ADMINISTRATOR:  
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Marc A. Johnson\*\*

First, I want to assure you that your role as a unit administrator is vital in your organization. Periodically, I have experienced an identity crisis in which I ask "What have I done this year? What difference do I make?" We have a very productive faculty who, for the most part, run their own shows. It took service on several CSRS review teams for me to see what difference a unit head makes. Two of the reviews were in departments that had selected unit heads just recently, following long periods with acting heads who lacked a long-term mandate for action. During the few years without unit heads, these departments experienced rapid declines in productivity and reputation. Unit heads provide the focus and the expectation to make a unit work. Without a conductor, an orchestra of fine musicians cannot make music.

Today, I will address responsibilities of a unit head, the roles they play to accomplish these responsibilities, and the powers at hand to carry out these roles.

### Responsibilities

Responsibilities broadly define the job description and the performance criteria for the unit leader. The overall responsibility is to provide taxpayers a high level of products for their tax dollar. Corporate employees work for stockholders, cooperative employees work for the members, and public

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\* Presented at the North Central Administrative Development Workshop, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska, June 26, 1991.

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servants work for taxpayers. Anything your unit does that does not contribute to the taxpayers' interests is counterproductive and has to be internally justified.

One dimension of responsibility is to produce a high volume and quality of output from each departmental enterprise, such as research, extension, teaching, etc. It is important to distinguish inputs from outputs. Taxpayers don't care how hard faculty work, how many grant dollars they receive, or how many meetings they attend. Those aren't products. Taxpayers are concerned with how many students are taught well, how much useful information is produced, and how many useful extension meetings are held and bulletins are published.

The second dimension of responsibility is to assure future output by promoting the professional and personal growth of the people in your units. Often, we let management of operating money dominate our work, because it is under our control. But in most departments, personnel represents over 80 percent of expenses. It is important to pay attention to the productive potential of the people in your unit, which represents the greatest asset of an academic institution.

The third dimension of responsibility is tactical: to accept everything that goes wrong as your challenge. According to Brian Tracy, in his tape series on the Psychology of Achievement, accepting responsibility for one's own actions is one of the basic prerequisites for achievement. For a smoothly running unit, you will listen for problems, accept them as your own, and fix them.

A reasonable set of evaluation criteria for unit heads includes:

a) Does the unit produce a high volume and quality of relevant output? b) Are

the unit's faculty growing professionally? c) Is the unit operating smoothly with few complaints? All of these must be carried out in an environment that values democratic faculty governance and tenure; your degrees of freedom to reward are few. That is, you don't have many carrots and you can't use a stick. You have to rely on persuasion and the sense of professionalism among your colleagues.

## Roles

A unit head must play many roles to accomplish these responsibilities. Each of you will be better at some than others. Max DePree writes of the importance of developing intimacy with a job:

"Being an effective department supervisor on a manufacturing floor is fundamentally different from giving seminars about it... Intimacy with a job leads one to understand that when training people to do a job, one needs to teach not only the skill of the job but the art of it as well. And the art of it always has to do with the personality of both the operator and the machine." (p. 46)

The artistic part of the job appears as each of you adjust your management styles to a unique set of people, history, administrators, and university/client relationships. Within your environment you will play at least nine roles.

Resource Manager. Your primary role is to manage the resources of your unit. To manage effectively, you need to know what effective means. This requires a clear set of objectives about the nature of your unit's outputs and

the professional development of your faculty. These objectives should be broadly accepted by your faculty.

Because unit heads control operating dollars, they typically spend an inordinate amount of time fiddling with them. People represent at least 80 percent of the expenditures in your units. So you should spend most of your time protecting, nourishing, and stimulating your people resources. Whenever you ask a person to come to a meeting, that person cannot produce on his/her other tasks while in the meeting. Meetings can be productive, but every meeting should have a purpose and its own criteria for success; the productivity loss from the disruption should be justified by an even greater gain.

People resources must be protected and set free to work on the central objectives of the unit. This may mean protection from demands from elsewhere, either on or off campus. Remember, for the most part, universities do not charge directly for services. When services are free, the quantity of services demanded exceeds the quantity of services available. Just think of how you treat orange juice and water at breakfast. You order orange juice in small glasses and drink it all -- you are paying dearly for it. You would order water even if you didn't intend to drink it -- its free. Because universities don't price individual services, faculty time must be protected by your administrative support.

Management economists describe efficient multi-product management with an equi-marginal rule. Each of your units has multiple products: various classes, research projects, and extension products. The equi-marginal principle states that an operation is running efficiently when another dollar or unit of time devoted to one activity produces more output of equal value

than if those resources were devoted to any other activity. For if more resources devoted to activity A would yield great gain and more resources devoted to activity B would yield little gain, resources should be taken from B and applied to A; total value of products would rise.

These are the trade-offs you make daily as a resource manager. A clear set of unit goals will identify the types of products that have value. A clear understanding of your unit will reveal how small amounts of additional resources will affect total output. A good knowledge of each individual's capabilities will reveal how to allocate resources for professional development. Resource management requires a broad view of what is going on in your unit and an ability to visualize the benefit-cost trade-offs that occur when resources are moved.

Facilitator. A facilitator is a middleman, a broker, who has knowledge of resources available and markets for your products. The unit leader is the only person in a unit who is being evaluated on whole-unit output. Unit heads are most likely to know what everyone is doing and to have the most frequent interactions with other heads and clients. So, the unit head is in a position to identify individuals with common interests and identify opportunities for developing interdisciplinary activity. As a facilitator, the unit head draws resources together and creates teams to address high-interest issues.

Decision-maker. All jobs of a unit head require decision making, but the unit head has a special role of stopping the buck on his/her desk. Decisions should be made in a timely fashion and be very crisp. When faculty members need more resources to take an unforeseen opportunity, a quick yes or no answer and a determination of amount are required. If they cannot get a quick decision, they will be locked up in not knowing which way to proceed.

Slow decisions create uncertainty, and uncertainty is a roadblock to faculty productivity.

Challenger. The unit head's most productive role is that of challenger. After knowing the capabilities and interests of one's faculty, the unit head is responsible for setting the expectations of performance for the unit and for each individual and of professional development for each individual. Expectations of volume and quality can lift the sights of individuals who are unsure of the appropriate mix and level of output. Expectations of openness and participation lead the professional culture within a unit. Expectations are the types of challenges that tend to be met.

However, expectations need to be within reason. Expectations can go beyond the interests of faculty members and become debilitating. I can draw from my own mistakes as an example. At K-State, we have a young star who researches and teaches superbly. He had shown so much talent and productivity, that I suggested he could set his sights on national agricultural economics or economics journals. After a year under this set of expectations, he produced two articles in a national journal, as I knew he could. During our annual evaluation session, he said he was going to apply for a position elsewhere, because, although he had proven to both himself and me that he could produce national journal articles, what really interested him was the more applied work published in station bulletins and regional journals. All of his work met objectives of the land grant mission, and I was not about to lose this kind of talent, so I changed my expectations for this individual to support his interests in serving the Kansas taxpayers in his most effective way.

Critic. Another important role of a unit head is to be an effective

critic. First, the unit needs a system of professional criticism, such as faculty and graduate student seminars and a paper review system. These systems generate forums for faculty to show their theses and to defend them, which is the way universities have operated back to the 13th century.

A good faculty evaluation system also is important as a structural way for the unit head to critically evaluate individual performance. I use a modified management-by-objective approach, in which a faculty member makes plans for the year and is evaluated against these plans. A unit head is a good critic when he/she can discuss weaker portions of a faculty member's performance in a straightforward, analytical manner to determine what the problems are and how to remedy them. These are sometimes uncomfortable sessions, but if kept on a plane of helping someone succeed rather than judging the individual's worth, they really go pretty well.

Conflict Resolver. The least fun in your job will be conflict management. I've experienced students complaining about faculty performance, faculty accusing students of cheating, former demonstrations against an extension faculty member, faculty disagreements, faculty-secretary disputes, secretary-secretary disputes, and cases of racial discrimination (in which we were found innocent). These conflicts often need to be resolved quickly and crisply; sometimes it is best to let people live with a conflict until it resolves itself. Whatever the appropriate approach, the rules of due process work well, i.e., the accused has a right to know who has accused them of what, all parties have a right to provide evidence, decisions are made on the evidence, and the losing party often has an appeal process to use.

Cheerleader. The unit head also acts as a cheerleader for his/her unit's faculty and programs. The unit head is assumed to be knowledgeable

about what is good and poor in his/her discipline. The unit head can serve as a third party who can brag about the accomplishments of individuals to the administration and to clientele. You must be careful to maintain your credibility by being honest about weaknesses, as well. You cannot tell your Dean that a person is a star and the next week recommend a below average pay raise.

Politician. As a politician, your role is to represent your unit across campus, across the state, and across professional societies, building a case that your unit is worthwhile and productive. A reputation is actively earned. When administrators, clientele, and other faculty have a good feeling about the contributions of your unit, things are more likely to come your way; you will have more friends in high places.

Visionary. A unit head also must be central in seeing a vision for changing future objectives for the unit. The visionary information is most likely to come from faculty and clients; the unit head's role is to keep open ears and an open mind and to direct the whole unit toward marginal change through time.

## **Powers**

Some years ago on the CBS-TV show "Dallas", Jock Ewing was instructing Bobby about how to run their oil company. Bobby had complained that his father hadn't assigned him any power, and Jock shot back that "you aren't given power, you take it." I would paraphrase that statement to say, you aren't given power, you make it. As a unit leader, you have certain authorities for spending from various funds, recommending salaries and promotions, and authorizing travel, all meticulously overseen by layers of

control system above you. Most of these powers are quite logical and are explained to you in your first week in office (if you're lucky).

Essentially, however, real power comes from real leadership. In my experience, the roots of leadership are two: a) having and expressing good ideas and b) being willing to take responsibility. These two personal dimensions seem to quickly separate a small group of leaders from followers. Then the measure of your power is the freedom you are given to enact your agenda. And the degree of freedom is determined by your strength of persuasion, your unit's performance and reputation, and your attention to internal and external politics.

## Conclusion

The responsibility, roles, and powers of unit heads are quite varied. If you like a job with a lot of variety and continuous surprises, you've found a good one. If you hold firm to a few principles; keep your orientation to output and professional growth; and be open, honest, and straightforward, you will be successful in the job.

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## THE ROLE OF THE UNIT ADMINISTRATOR

### Questions

1. List the outputs of an academic or service unit in a College of Agriculture. How do you measure quality of the outputs?
2. What role should a professional development plan hold in the program plan of a faculty member? What constitutes a good professional development plan?
3. If you were told that your total unit budget would be reduced permanently by 5 percent in each of the next 3 years, how would you determine what personnel and programs to remove?
4. What are the corporate expectations you have delivered to your unit? How did you deliver these expectations?
5. How do you determine the nature and level of expectations for each individual in your unit? How are salary and other awards distributed?
6. Describe a complete system of professional criticism in an agricultural unit. How close is your unit to the ideal?
7. From whom or from where does a unit get its vision to set long-term goals? Describe a mechanism to maintain a degree of focus on a dynamic long-term vision.
8. List individuals and groups you should stay in contact with concerning your unit's activities, performance, and needs. What is the most effective method of contact with each?

