

# Utilizing Role Theory and Mentoring to Minimize Stress for New Faculty

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## Introduction

The chances of effective mentoring relationships being established and maintained can be enhanced through knowledge and conscious recognition of basic role theory. Effective mentoring represents the establishment of a specific short term relationship which can have long term results. It finds itself moving from the realm of training into that of organizational and personal development for the overall good of the organizational health. Nowhere is this truer than in higher education, a place rife with complexity and possibilities.

Role theory is utilized to predict and analyze human behavior in specifically defined situations and relationships. Role conflict(s) occurs when expected behavior of an individual and the expectations on the part of the individual about how he or she is expecting to act do not agree (Olsen and Near, 180). This happens throughout life from early childhood through finality.

Furthermore, role theory articulates the overlapping sets of concentric circles of interpersonal relationships which all people experience. Within the academic setting, regular, non-administrative professors are expected to be leaders in the classroom, collegial participants in Department deliberations, leaders on committees, subservient at times to the Chair, and more so to the Dean and the wishes of the usually more removed Provost and President. This type of jockeying and changing of hats causes internal conflict and confusion. And this is just at work. At home, one adds in the entire myriad of roles and demands found everyday

from being husband, wife, parent, child of, consumer, leader, follower, etc. Indeed the number of roles which we all fill often seems nearly endless. So do the pressures and satisfaction that come with the various roles.

Mentoring is a state of mind which creates a mutually supportive culture which encourages sharing of ideas and norms allowing experienced personnel to lead and openly and unjudgmentally create interpersonal communications resulting in a faster and more constructive/progressive start-up for a new employee entering any organization. The more complex the organization, the more this adage finds truth. And nearly no organization is more complex than that found in higher education; a segmented, multi-tiered place where experts within various fields, all speaking different idioms bound by discipline, all gather to build institutions of historically lasting values.

Turnover is relatively high, given natural attrition and greener pastures, but the idea of locals and cosmopolitans finds root here in the halls of academe. Also does the idea of new faculty entering as semi-well established adults with experience and expectation. The idea of role conflict enters into the equation as many of these people are thrust back to beginning stages of career development due to job descriptions and simple “newness.”

The roles of a college professor are fluid, complex and, inherent conflicts exist. A well established mentoring program can lessen missteps. This discussion will describe role conflict and how theoretical knowledge of role can aid in the establishment and continuation of a mentoring program within the academic setting

leading to the ultimate success of newer faculty, specifically at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

### **Theoretical Construct**

The idea of role conflict find its roots throughout the literature reflecting the idea that as Shakespeare wrote in As You Like It “All the world’s a stage and all the men and women, merely players, they have their exits and their entrances and each one in his time plays many parts.....” Nowhere in is this statement truer than in the multi-tiered complexity of higher education. What makes the higher education platform unique is the fact that peers are responsible for governing each other and creating a progressive climate for a primarily disconnected main audience of beneficiaries, namely students. The universe of higher education is unique in this aspect and the professionals, in this case, professors, within this setting are inherently prone to role conflict as the different personalities and roles which they adopt sometimes unavoidably collide. Under everyday circumstances, this type of environment could easily be the source for anxiety and stress among even the most veteran members of the group. However, the complexities of this situation are compounded both on an overall organizational level as well as on a group-departmental interpersonal level when new members are introduced into a relatively static status quo and expected to assimilate into the group. With the introduction of new faculty, as with any group, the status quo is disturbed as the dynamics of the group adjust to make room for the new participants. As in Lewin’s

**Force Field Analysis Theory (Blanchard, p.122) the group has to adjust its energy forces to accommodate new members of the group.**

### **General Background**

**During the past twenty years, the demands on new and newer faculty have increased exponentially. Academic budgets are always under a microscope, and qualifications for tenure have been increased even as the very existence of tenure is under continual scrutiny. Part-time and Adjunct faculty percentages have increased at many institutions and systems, instituted as a cost saving feature always with little thought given to how it will affect the students or full-time faculty who are charged with advising these students. Couple with this idea the fact that new and newer faculty are still often put in the position of doing the professionally-oriented initiation types of activities such as taking minutes at meetings and teaching basic classes which many more veteran faculty see as being past them and deem to part of the new hire's initial responsibilities further complicates the lives of the newer hires. This situation rings just as true for veteran professors who are just beginning in a new job as it does for the recent doctoral graduate who has just started his first full-time tenure track position. However, the mentality of many Universities and academic departments has changed towards how to orient and support new hires in general.**

**Mentoring is different in length of time and content than orientation. Mentoring represents a commitment of time, over a significant span of time where orientation is usually a finite period of introduction of formal information. Unlike in the previous periods during the past decade at Indiana University of**

**Pennsylvania (IUP) there has been a concerted effort to help new faculty learn about the culture and workings of the institution. This movement began with initiatives led by the faculty Union Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculty (APSCUF) and the IUP Department of Human Resources. In recent years, there has been a two-day general orientation session for new faculty across the University. This has included sessions on University Structure and Governance, Retirement, and Tenure, to name a few. The orientation is also designed for the newer faculty to hopefully meet and connect with other newer faculty, naturally network, and form collegial alliances across disciplines. These efforts are followed up by APSCUF Committees for both New Faculty (under two years) and Newer Faculty (under 5 or 6 years depending on need). The APSCUF Committees organize both content oriented and social activities several times during the academic year and are, in all seriousness available to help new and newer faculty through the often times anxiety producing years before tenure.**

**IUP is a strong Union-based University and whose Union leadership works tirelessly to protect the legal contractually guaranteed rights of individual faculty. In addition, it deals with the formal University bureaucracy and attendant complexities. However, often times it is not the formal structure or relationships which spell success or failure for an individual faculty member. Instead, it is the informal relationships, generally within the individual disciplinary departments and colleges which will ultimately guarantee success or failure for the newer faculty. This is certainly the case at IUP.**

**The Union-driven environment dictates that the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) governs much of the Evaluation and Tenuring Process at IUP and throughout the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PA-SSHE). This information is freely available to all interested parties and is disseminated and explained to new faculty upon arrival.**

**The PA-SSHE tenuring process involves peer evaluation by colleagues and the Departmental Chairperson each semester and an annual evaluation is submitted to the Dean, the Provost, and the President. The probationary period lasts five years by which time a substantial amount of usually meaningful, but sometimes-extraneous information has been formally documented on the record of an individual faculty member in the areas of teaching, scholarship and service.**

**The most critical years of evaluation are the first and second going into the third. In order to separate a faculty member from the University after that Professor's third year requires meeting the CBAs standard of "just cause" and the support of the make-up University-wide faculty Tenure Committee. It can be a messy process which, as one can imagine, at times pits colleague against colleague and factions departments. It behooves Departments to correctly document their faculty's progress and remediate when possible. Otherwise the separation process can be quite traumatic. A miniscule number of faculty members who serve five years are not tenured. But, of course, the heart of the relationship and success is found in the department support structure for new faculty.**

**For nearly fifteen years, the faculty number and make-up of IUP Department of Communications Media's Department had been remarkably stable.**

There were two retirements and one resignation during this period. One new faculty hire took place six years ago. Prior to that period, nine of eleven faculty had been hired, at least two ABD and required to finish within a three year period or be separated for cause. During this period, the University did painfully little to orient the new faculty to the University. Often times, the faculty member would have a quick meeting with Human Resources to sign up for health insurance and retirement, be shown an office and the classrooms, and meet the entire faculty at the first faculty meeting. Support systems were very informal, as alliances were formed based on trial and error as well as the establishment of self-interest. It certainly led to some awkwardness in the early days of some budding careers and threatened the existence of others. However, as the faculty gained rank and tenure there also was a change in the attitude towards new faculty and a growing realization about the need for the senior faculty to make an organized, even if informal continuing effort to mentor new faculty. The idea of mentoring became part of the Department culture as a new generation of faculty began to be hired and integrated into a growingly diverse curriculum. (Presently, there is also the real expectation that the Communications Media Department will be hiring approximately four more full-time faculty within the next two years due to the addition of a Doctoral level program.) This philosophy was tested most recently when two new faculty were hired at the same time.

### **The Anatomy of Faculty Mentoring:**

More often than not new faculty are expected to “hit the ground running” unlike in the corporate culture where prolonged training and development are often part and parcel of the hiring process and fully integrated into the first months and sometimes years of employment. In higher education, the expectations among most academic departments that “We are hiring a professional and we NEED them NOW” often times to cover immediate student load at the beginning of a semester, etc.

In the academic setting, there exists a culture of “equal expertise.” This is the situation in which most members of a particular unit such as a department or college have achieved similar levels of academic achievement and experience.

Therefore there is often little time, patience, or perceived need for an organizational learning curve of norms and behaviors. For generations there was little recognizable support which formally supported new faculty members in their quest to learn the academic norms of any given institution. However, over the past two decades there has been a growing realization that differences in academically based organizational cultures require the same reasonable and sustained amount adjustment support for new hires, in this case specifically new faculty, as that found in industry. There is even an argument to be made that more guidance might be necessary in the higher education setting given the inherently political nature of college or university setting (Baldrige , p.107) in order to insure that new faculty will have the best chances for of learning and adjusting to organizational norms. However, because of the collegial setting, mentoring can often be awkward. It is with this foresight in mind that the IUP Communications Media Department began



**making a conscious effort to mentor new faculty and hopefully help smooth the way for a successful career in the Department.**

**Within the Department of Communications Media, the success of a mentoring program started during the prolonged hiring process asking, among others, the following questions:**

- 1. Will this new Professor fit into the norms of our Departments?**
- 2. How does the Senior Faculty help the new Professor to succeed without appearing to be overbearing or paternalistic/maternalistic?**
- 3. How will the new Professor change the personality of the Department?**
- 4. Are the changes that the new Professor will bring desirable?**

### **Case Study**

**In 2004, the Department of Communications Media had the opportunity to hire two new faculty. One was a replacement for a retired Professor and the other represented a new line. In both cases, the job descriptions entailed assisting the Department in moving towards development in the disciplines of electronic gaming and animation, two sub-disciplines for which the curriculum was calling but ones for which there was little expertise represented in the present faculty. New classes were listed on the fall schedule for both of the new hires along with the idea that one or both would teach the basic introductory course(s) as well.**

**The faculty members were both married men with families about forty years old. They were arriving from previous positions at a land grant institution where they had either not applied for or not received tenure because, for lack a better**

**descriptor, publication records were not competitive in that environment. (In the PA-SSHE system, rigorous scholarship is expected but it can take many forms ranging from traditional articles and books to productions to grants, etc.) However, for the IUP Communications Media Department, both individuals were thought to be very strong and be able to compliment not only each other but the new growing curricular goals. As with all new faculty, expectations among the existing faculty and the University ran high.**

**By its very nature, newness breeds anxiety. Anxiety can cause mistakes and missteps. It was with this in mind, as well as past personal experiences among some of the Senior Faculty, that the Communications Media Department actively entered into mentoring the new faculty. In reality, the Chairperson, he the elected and formal organizational leader carefully introduced the new faculty to the structure of the Department. At the same time, at least two Senior Faculty offered to serve as mentors for the two new individuals. The offer was to act as formal and informal support to the professors; without political implications and hopefully offered as a safe haven for both men. The new professors were not assigned mentors, they were free to accept or reject the offers of the senior faculty. Both new professors did so.**

**The time period of the mentorship was agreed to be one year of informal but regularly scheduled meetings for questions and answers as well as availability for help in off times. Every effort was made on the part of the Mentors not to be overbearing and yet to be available and watching with an interested eye but making every effort to maintain a respectful distance knowing that all individuals have to find their way(s) and establish their norms of behavior.**

**In theory, if lack of knowledge about a place or situation can breed anxiety than anxiety can be reduced and reassurance can be supplied by a person who could be perceived as being in a role of authority. In other words a situation of a new faculty member being mentored by a senior faculty member can fill the gaps which cause anxiety. To address this set of concerns there is a philosophy and rule of “free will” integrated into the mentoring relationship in the Communications Media Department. As much as possible the idea of professional respect is articulated throughout the mentoring period. In this way the new faculty are sought after for their new ideas and encouraged to bring them to the forefront. It is to be hoped that the new faculty who universally arrive at least a bit nervous but naturally possessing a new perspective are able to bring some characteristics of being a change agent with them. The ability on the part of the mentor to reassure the new faculty member and, yes, at times protect the professor in the naturally politically charged climate of academe allows the new faculty to more fully develop and branch out quickly and efficiently. When done effectively the impact of new faculty on established Departmental dynamics, both interpersonal and curricular is at once unthreatening and meaningful. It allows the newer faculty to have real input into departmental decision-making and establish themselves within the departmental family structure. Encouraging and allowing new faculty to enter into departmental dynamics without having them have to constantly be wary helps take advantage of their newness and vitality. Lowering anxiety increases productivity.**

**However, there must be willingness on the part of the new faculty to communicate and participate. Without the opportunity on the part of the**

established faculty to “get to know” the newer faculty both on a professional and personal level, the relationship of trust and confidence can possibly breakdown proving to be counter productive and raising anxiety among all concerned. The avenue of trust and comfort zone is a two-way street.

Much of the responsibility for the success for an effective mentoring program lies with the Departmental Chairperson who will set the tone by continuing to be available to steward the new hires. Without the support and the tone setting of the Chair, peer mentoring programs will prove less effective.

In the IUP Communications Media Department, the Chairperson has set and maintained an organizational tone where the goals of the individual and the goals of the Department intersect. Senior faculty has actively supported this intra-departmental organizational culture. Therefore a new faculty member learns through early encounters that the Department will do its best to support new faculty and their new ideas. Because of this the two new faculty hired in 2004 were able to create or enlarge two Centers within the Department, find funding, and begin to develop the disciplinary streams for which they hired.

The paths have not been without there bumps but the strides which both individuals and by association, the Department have been able to attain have been striking. The Communications Media Department is expanding on both the undergraduate and the graduate levels continuing to gain enrollment and offer support to faculty members involved in a myriad number of activities ranging from writing books to producing original electronic media. The ability to integrate new

faculty into the program is presently essential and will continue to be integral as the Department grows in the next decade.

### **Selected Limitations and Pitfalls**

As everyone knows, no relationship, even those developed under the best of circumstances with the best of intentions, is perfect. This serves to remind us of our humanity. Thus, it should be noted that mentoring can have its own pitfalls. A possible negative side effect of mentoring which can occur and whose importance should not be underestimated is that the advisor-advisee, mentor-mentored relationship can slip over the boundaries of the professional into the realm of family-type relationships, specifically that of parent-child or older sibling-younger sibling. This change in role perspective can happen very slowly, almost insidiously, without either party being aware of its occurrence or its beginnings.

It becomes very difficult to watch individuals' misstep and not desire to want to help correct the situation. . It is also the area of mentoring where role conflict is most likely to occur. Issues arise. When are mentors overstepping the comfort zone of the mentored? When does being a Senior Faculty member turn from being a colleague role into a parent role? Clearly there is no definitive answer but this situation presents itself. In the case of new faculty in a mentoring relationship, it can complicate the roles and role definition for a new faculty member already mired in the details of a new situation even as this individual is trying to balance professional and personal roles while etching out a unique corner in the

**Department. Awareness of its possible occurrence can in itself act as a guard against it happening.**

### **Conclusion**

**Understanding and applying role theory has been instrumental in helping streamline the integration, and appreciation of the new faculty members to the Communications Media Department at IUP. The effectiveness of the mentoring experience on all concerned cannot be underestimated. When instituted sincerely and thoughtfully it will, by its nature help reduce role conflict and as a byproduct reduce anxiety and increase productivity. Mentoring can and should be utilized throughout higher education since it the general organizational structure of colleges and universities possess more similarities than differences.**

**By nature, education is a humanistic endeavor and the professionals who are involved generally subscribe to philosophies of respect and support. Little can be judged more supportive than reducing anxiety among family, friends and colleagues. For new faculty mentoring can be an effective avenue to success for the individual, the Department and the over-all institution for years to come.**

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