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My word

Overcommitment

Anne Calof

Here you are, you have your first academic job. You were lucky to get it, of course, but you also worked very hard. You did enough high-profile research, sent out hundreds of job applications, went out on dozens of interviews, schmoozed with countless potential colleagues, negotiated setup funds, space and renovations, and now you're a new assistant professor.

What now? The answer is obvious: get a grant, do your research and become proficient at teaching. Sounds simple (or at least feasible), doesn't it? And it would be, too, if there wasn't a carefully crafted obstacle course in place to ensure that now that you have finally attained the position to which you've aspired for so long, you will be unable to do the work you were trained to do.

What forms do these obstacles take, and how can you avoid them? Obstacles fall into two categories: the overtly distasteful and the dangerously seductive. In the first category, the two most common obstacles are meetings and committees. Both are regarded as highly desirable alternatives to real work by the bureaucratic mind, and if you want to get anything done, you will need to take special pains to avoid them. Try the following approaches.

Just say no. Those among you with real strength of character, rehearse the following sentence: "I'm sorry, but I don't have time." I will salute you and you will (probably) go far. Because the big trick to this technique is not in uttering the sentence, it's in dealing with the consequences. These include: on the mild side, disapproval; and on the severe side, vengeance. As vengeance will, at

least in the beginning, probably take the form of more suggestions that you participate in meetings and committees, you may try repeated application of the 'Just say no' approach. There will come a time, however, when your survival instinct tells you that this will no longer work. In that event, move on to the second approach.

Run away. This is the technique favored by the professionals. Ever noticed how the really important people in your department never attend those endless meetings to discuss curriculum, never participate in those committees that regulate every detail of academic life? That's because they're never around to be asked. If Dr X is always flying off to some distant locale to give a seminar, Dr X is also out of the line of fire.

Try rehearsing the following: "I'm sorry, but I don't have time"

This approach is the most effective, I think, but it may be difficult to implement until you've managed to build a big enough reputation, or at least to establish a network among your peers for inviting one another to give seminars. Still, give it some consideration, and go on out there and start networking. In the meantime, you may be forced into the third approach.

Find an alternative committee or meeting. This, the most socially acceptable approach, requires the most careful planning. If you don't want to serve on the committee that decides how many autoclaves your department is going to buy, and options 1 and 2 are exhausted, then volunteer to serve on a search committee or a committee for graduate student admission. The planning part comes in knowing that such alternative committees exist, and in ascertaining that they need new members.

On the positive side, at least something of use may result from your efforts. On the negative side, committee meetings in which the participants try to accomplish something are longer than other meetings, and participants are often doomed to frustration as their recommendations are only rarely followed. In any event, as you actually served, you'll gain credit applicable to your next use of the 'Just say no' approach.

If all else fails, go but keep your mouth shut. This should be self-evident, but often isn't. I myself am incapable of implementing this approach. To give you an example, at my first faculty meeting, I suggested that members of my department go on strike in order to emphasize to the administration our displeasure at some pending affront. Fortunately for me, everyone assumed I was joking (I wasn't), broke into laughter, and ignored me. I emerged unscathed, but a more practical person would have realized that by speaking, not only did I fail to accomplish anything, I actually lengthened the meeting.

Obstacles that fall into the second, dangerously seductive, category include requests to write review articles, to review grants, and to review manuscripts; in other words, requests to do things such as write this column. I'll be frank; I almost always say yes to these requests, because I almost always learn something. The end result is that I'm always overcommitted and always behind on everything. Still, it keeps me from being bored (in fact, it keeps me from normal sleep patterns), and that's important, because it motivates me to find ways around the 'overtly distasteful' obstacles. So, if you discover any new approaches, please let me know.

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