

THE NISOD PAPERS



An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.

Adjusting Your Leadership Post-Covid

In the wake of the Covid vaccine and governors lifting mask mandates in some states, many faculty and administrative staff who were previously displaced due to the pandemic are returning to campus this fall. But to say that things will be “back to normal” is discrediting the experience we have all had over the past academic year.

The incoming freshmen in our classes have had a mostly virtual college experience as well. Many will not know what to expect when they sit in a college class for the first time after being isolated in their home for the past year. Faculty and students are feeling a mixture of excitement and nervousness for the upcoming year, and all of these lurking emotions can make for a very volatile situation to say the least.

Facing the Fear of Returning to Campus

As a department head, I recognize many faculty members simply do not want to be on campus. There are fears of Covid variants running rampant on campus. For faculty members who are considered high-risk, or who have loved ones who are considered high-risk, those fears have merit. These individuals are concerned about contracting the virus, taking it home to a loved one, and creating a bigger issue in the household that many institutions may not have the resources or the ability to cover.

Added to these fears is the conditioning we’ve all experienced of wearing a mask and isolating from others. We’ve become comfortable and adjusted to small crowds, being around fewer people, and remaining distant from others. Our current situation has shaped our thinking and changed how we perceive the world and the people we interact with.

Furthermore, I’ve spoken with people who have admitted they are vaccinated but still wear their mask because they don’t want to be perceived as a “Trump Supporter.” We may still not have healed from the politicization of masks is a result of the 2020 election.

Chaos Theory on Campus

Many human resources departments are behind in writing policies for their organization post-Covid. More pressing operational issues had to be addressed immediately. Taking the time to write new policies, have committees approve them, and have a Board approve them were simply too much for some HR departments to manage. But the return of telling faculty that they have to be on campus a certain number of hours a week, even if they don’t have classes that day, will not be well received.

As a department head, I feel that if a faculty member is teaching their classes, responding to student issues, and grading in a timely manner, how can HR demand that I force them to be on campus full-time? How can the leadership above me expect me to be on campus five days a week as well? I’ve functioned and performed my work duties 100 percent from home for over a year. It’s a fine line for many of us to walk as leaders. Faculty, staff, students, and administrators alike may not be prepared for the shift in mindset that comes once “usual operations” resume on campus. The chances of individuals falling back into the same old routines that make higher education stagnant is highly likely as they yearn for the comfortable and familiar again.

Now What?

As leaders, how we treat others not only impacts the workplace culture of our college, it also has an impact on our students. How we treat and lead our colleagues will spill over into the classroom. And when this culture spills into the classroom, we should hope it’s not poison, making an already tense situation worse.

Situational Leadership

Developed by Hersey and Blanchard in the 1960s, situational leadership has merit for returning to campus under the current circumstances. This model says there is no perfect leadership style, and that leaders should strive for a balance between task-based roles and relationship roles. With each situation that emerges, it is important to assess if this is an opportunity to complete a task or an opportunity to enhance a relationship. Too often leaders are quick to jump in and resolve a problem without first asking if the person wants the leader to do anything.

For example, if an instructor is venting about a student in their classroom who has an irrational request to extend a due date or is scheduling office hours and then not showing up, a simple question of “How can I help from here?” can go a long way. The faculty member may not require help; they may only want you to listen. Be careful not to overstep your leadership role because you feel you must make up for lost time spent working from home last year. Projecting your needs onto faculty is not fair to them and can make faculty members think you don’t trust them to handle the situation on their own.

Gatherings, Modifications, and Vulnerability

In department meetings and one-on-one discussions, open dialogue addressing concerns and fears should be noted. Even if you don’t agree with someone’s perspective about Covid and organizational operations, listening to their words can go a long way.

Consider asking for input when scheduling meetings with faculty or staff. Instead of automatically scheduling a department meeting in the “usual” manner, consider sending out a survey to ask faculty if they prefer to meet face-to-face or online. Maybe it’s a mixture of the two throughout the year to balance out the needs of all faculty members. After all, if all of the work gets done, how much does the geography of the people involved in the task matter?

We should also be careful not to make assumptions about the leadership above us. There are a number of conversations that go on behind closed doors at pay grades way above ours that we will not be privy to. Instead of complaining about a decision, perhaps we should trust those who have more information than we do. Too many times we are quick to make assumptions when we should be giving people the benefit of the doubt. After all, if you are working at an institution and you do not trust the leadership in charge, why are you still there?

Some leaders think vulnerability shows weakness. The truth is quite the opposite. If you are struggling with returning to campus, having to wake up earlier, fighting traffic, or are having a hard time focusing, let your team know. You may not be able to provide all the details depending on the situation, but if you are open about working through issues and trying to maintain a positive attitude throughout the process, your team will notice. Their behavior is a direct response to your behavior and authenticity as a leader.

In the end, how we act as leaders has a direct impact on our faculty, which ultimately rolls down to the students. Students have already been through so much during the past academic year. They should not be faced with more issues in the classroom when many are excited to be returning to campus or starting their traditional college experience.

Teaching students in our classes and effective leadership on campus really does take all of us; no matter what title we have within our institutions. As great technology revolutionary Steve Jobs said, “Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower.” Returning to campus in the fall will require innovation in all of us with our thoughts, words, and behaviors towards others.

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