

**SAMPLE**

**COMMUNICATION  
AND  
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

**A HANDBOOK FOR  
THE NEW DEPARTMENT CHAIR**

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J. EMMETT WINN

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ACADEMIC IMPRESSIONS | 2016  
DENVER, CO

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Published by Academic Impressions.

CR Mrig Company. 4601 DTC Blvd., Suite 800, Denver,  
CO 80237.

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Cover design by Brady Stanton.

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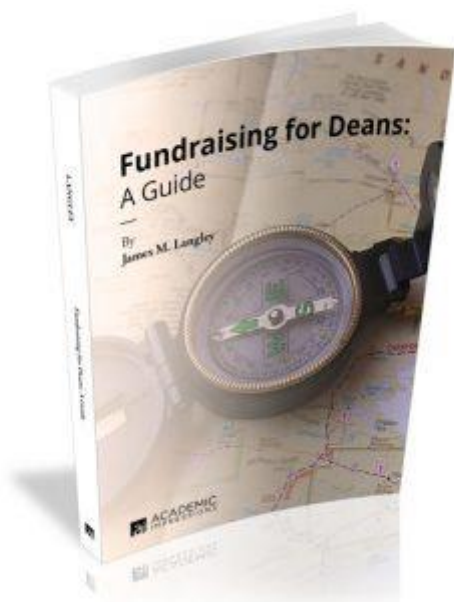
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Academic Impressions

ISBN: 978-1-948658-07-2

Printed in the United States of America.

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J. EMMETT WINN

# INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is more difficult than it sounds, yet essential to the department chair position—it will make or break a department chair. Surveys conducted by Robert E. Cipriano and Richard L. Riccardi over a period of seven years with more than five hundred responses from department chairs from across the United States show that the chairs themselves ranked communication as one of their top three essential skills (along with budget skills and the ability to effectively evaluate faculty).

The truth is that interacting with the broad group of faculty, staff, students, alumni, and others who make up academic departments, schools, and colleges requires good communication skills because these individuals bring a wide range of experiences and perspectives to the department.

- **If you are an academic dean**, consider using this book as a training guide for all new department chairs.
- **If you are a department chair**, use this book as a guide to improve the effectiveness of your communication in your role as a departmental leader, a manager, a coach, and a mentor.

This book was developed based on training that I provided at Academic Impressions' 2014 conference for department chairs.

Each chapter is focused on a specific communication skill (active listening, supportive communication, evaluating and responding effectively to faculty complaints, etc.), and each chapter offers practical tips and examples, an illustrative scenario, and a communication strategies toolbox to help you develop each skill.

Though rendered anonymous, the illustrative scenarios are based on actual situations that chairs have faced in the past. Sharing genuine experiences with chairs will demonstrate how to develop and use these skills. This is not to imply that the specific suggestions herein will work in every situation that appears to be similar, but the hope is that these accounts of past incidents will aid in brainstorming how to apply these communication skills in practice, in your own work.



# **SKILL 1**

## **ACTIVE LISTENING**

### **Where Chairs Can Go Wrong**

Effective communication with colleagues will make—or break—a department chair. Even a chair who excels at other critical job functions (such as fundraising) may be considered unsuccessful by the dean and the faculty if that chair is unable to deal effectively with disgruntled departmental citizens. I often hear comments from deans such as: “Joe is a great fundraiser, but his faculty hate him, so I don’t know how much longer I can leave him in the chair’s position.”

The two most common reasons that chairs are removed from their positions are:

- Their dean receives consistent complaints from faculty and/or students about the chair’s inability to address their problems.
- The faculty feel that the chair is unresponsive to their needs and, as a result, are uncooperative at best or, at worst, are openly antagonistic to the chair.

How does this happen? Frequently, these issues develop when chairs ignore long-standing faculty complaints, avoid communicating with “difficult” personalities, or sidestep

unpleasant situations because a solution is not clear or obvious.

## **A Communication Strategies Toolbox**

As a department chair, one cannot govern in a top-down mode, but rather must work cooperatively with the faculty. Therefore, a toolbox of communication strategies is needed that will help address problems even with the most difficult of individuals. Several years ago, a successful chair shared that he believed the secret to his success was listening first in any discussion or argument in which he was involved. Active listening is a critical part of the department chair's skill set.

In the pages that follow are strategies and sample scenarios to help build a toolbox of active listening strategies. This will review practical tips for:

1. Taking a step back to learn more and to avoid making quick decisions with only partial information.
2. Asking “encouraging questions” to uncover what is really at stake for your colleague.
3. Using “patient listening” to manage difficult people and complex complaints and conflicts.
4. Communicating in ways that will help you make the right decision in new or unfamiliar situations.

# 1. Step Back and Learn More before Choosing Your Response

Active listening can help you avoid making hasty decisions based on limited information in order to cope with urgent problems that appear to need immediate and decisive action. It's always critical to step back and learn more.

ELEMENTS OF ACTIVE LISTENING	
<b>Pay attention</b>	Maintain comfortable eye contact and nod your head to signal you understand and are listening. These behaviors demonstrate that you are paying attention and can help the speaker calm down and relax.
<b>Ask encouraging questions and/or repeat back</b>	Do this to help the speaker clarify unclear points; this conveys that you understand the problem or complaint.
<b>Be patient</b>	Don't rush the speaker or ask them to "jump to the end." If the speaker feels rushed, they may skip important context.
<b>Take notes and summarize the speaker's points at the end</b>	This helps in remembering important points and allows you the opportunity to ensure that you understand their perspective on the situation.

## READ MORE

We hope you have enjoyed this complimentary sample from *Communication and Conflict Management*.

You can purchase the entire book [here](#).



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