

Eight Attributes of a Functional Department¹

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Introduction

With thousands of faculty, staff and employees, the modern American university is, by anyone's reckoning, a large community. Far from existing as a single homogenous community, a university is more realistically considered as an archipelago of hundreds of sub-communities. Each lab, each service unit and each academic department functions autonomously as its own micro-community, complete with its own membership, politics, practices, conflicts, history and prevailing culture.

The success of a university is dependent on the micro-communities that comprise it. While universities tend to emphasize the talents of individual scholars, research shows that success attributed to individuals is something of a myth and is to a large extent dependent on the existence of a supportive community--"behind every great man or great woman lies a supportive community." Job satisfaction is as much dependent on qualities associated with the community as it is on other more tangible forms of compensation. Retention surveys conducted at the University of Illinois have shown that a primary reason for faculty departure is perceived problems with the communities to which they belong.

Communities are more than the sum of the individual members that comprise them. People have a set of mind-states in which they interact with themselves, another set in which they interact with single individuals and a third in which they interact as members of a community. As a result, a community is not just a physical collection of its constituents, but is also comprised of the diverse mind-states its members bring to the workplace. Some mind-states give rise to communities that are vibrant, resilient and self-adapting. Other mind-states do not.

Below are eight pairs of mind-states that either contribute to a functional community or discourage it.

1. **Conceiving Oneself to Be the Center-of-Gravity Versus a Supporting Player**

When faced with a situation of any significance, a person engages in a rapid calculus. In the calculus a person calculates the situation and their role in that situation, in one of two competing ways. First, one may conceive of oneself to be the defining character, the center-of-gravity or the "star" and others as supporting actors. Second one may conceive of another person or some aspect of the situation to be the center-of-gravity, and oneself to be a supporting actor. These two mind-states, in turn, give rise to two very different sets of attitudes, expectations and behaviors. As the center-of-gravity, one feels superior to one's surroundings, entitled and insulated from the demands that typify one's

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community. As a supporting player, one feels a sincere respect for the center-of-gravity and an eagerness to contribute to its well-being and success.

While there is no "right" state of mind for all situations, the members of a functional community tend to share a set of similar characteristics. First, they are not stuck in either mind-state, but flexibly alternate between being the center and taking a supporting role. Second, they cascade between a succession of conceived centers that might include another member of the community, a departmental initiative, a visitor from outside the community, the university as a whole or a higher ideal such as fairness, equality, or diversity. Third, they flexibly cascade through a succession of supporting roles. Fourth, they are infinitely inventive at creating both new centers-of-gravity and new supportive roles. Fifth, while occasionally assuming the stance of the center, their prevailing bias is to place themselves in a supporting role.

While universities are known to elevate its "stars," it could be argued that men and women of accomplishment arrive at their accomplishments, not by placing themselves at the center, but by a long and artful service to science, to scholarship, to the natural world, to various audiences, and to humanity as a whole.

In less than fully functional communities, one or more members of the community conceive of themselves to be the legitimate or rightful center of the community, to be more significant than their peers, and to be indispensable. They place themselves above the duties of their peers and insulate themselves from both the opinions and expectations of their colleagues. They expect the community and in particular, their unit executive officer to serve them. Rancorous politics can result from a community in which competing individuals or factions lay claim to central status. The presence of even one entrenched individual can demoralize the ranks of those who are ready to serve.

2. Protocol-Driven Versus Humanity-Oriented

Any given community is organized around one of two competing states-of-mind. It is either protocol-driven with embedded pockets of humanity. Or it is humanity-oriented, with pockets of protocols. Protocols refer to mechanical and regimented rules, politics, procedures and agendas. Humanity-oriented refers to the more holistic processes of understanding, acceptance, compassion and sharing.

The members of more functional communities tend to oscillate or "flutter" between protocols and humane practices, while maintaining an overall bias towards being humanity-oriented. Functional communities, while firmly established in the spirit of a free-humanity, necessarily establish isolated protocols around specified areas, such as travel vouchers, hiring and promotion and tenure. Some communities, because of the nature of their missions, have more extensive portfolios of protocols. A Department of Public Safety, or the Office of the Registrar is going to have a greater density of embedded protocols than a Department of Dance or School of Social Work.

3. "Doing" Versus "Giving" Oneself to the Work of the Community

In the context of a protocol-driven mind-state, one "does" the activities that comprise one's work. In the context of a humanity-oriented mind-state, one "gives" oneself to an idea, an initiative, or to service. Actions derived from "doing" tend to be narrow and circumscribed. Actions founded in "giving" or "sharing oneself" tend to be broader, more encompassing, more heartfelt and

compelling. The members of a functional community don't so much "do their jobs" as they "give themselves" to their work, to their co-workers, to various values and ideals and to service to the community.

4. **Clique-Groups Versus Free-Groups**

Even small communities are not themselves homogenous but are made up of small subgroups and independent individuals. Generally, there are two types of sub-groups that can best be described as cliques and free-groups. In a clique, there is a fixed membership, a distinct inside and outside, and one or more defining edges that lead to the control of turf or territory. There is often a rigid hierarchy with an alpha male or female presiding at the top. There are generally two types of cliques--relatively more benign social cliques that are based on popularity and more corrosive territorial cliques that are focused on the possession of turf and privileges. Territorial cliques can become entrenched and in turn, establish a system of patronage interactions with other cliques. Cliques and their patronage economies are always self-serving and always at odds with the stated mission of the larger community.

The other type of sub-groups are "free groups." Free groups are distinguished by their open membership, lack of fixed boundaries and lack of hierarchies. The members of free-groups affiliate on the basis of preference and mutual interests. Free-groups are marked by the respect for the separateness and independence of each individual. Territory is neither occupied nor defended and monopolistic interactions are not attempted.

In any community, there will be an evolving mix of social cliques, territorial cliques, free-groups and unaffiliated individuals. In functional communities, the formal leadership and free-groups work in a concerted fashion to break up territorial cliques. In less than functional communities, territorial cliques expand without challenge to the point that they dominate community politics and undermine the larger mission of the community.

5. **"Building Up" Versus "Tearing Down"**

All communities have goals and objectives that are central to their mission. There are only two ways an organization can make traction towards a given objective. First, it can make traction as the result of building links and bridges between its current location and the desired destination. Second, it can make progress as the result of tearing down obstacles, impediments and barriers that lie between its current location and its goal.

The human mind comes equipped with two mind-states, one of which underlies each of these two approaches. First, the mind-state of "building up" guides one to the micro-understandings, micro-alliances, micro-commitments, and micro-actions that will walk one, step-by-step, to the goal. Second, the mind-state of "tearing down" leads one to identify problems and obstacles and to analyze and attack them.

These two mind-states give rise to two styles of political associations and two types of political culture. Paradoxically, the mind-state of tearing down leads to alliances that are quick-forming and relatively powerful. In contrast, the mind-state of building up, leads to alliances that are slow-forming and relatively weak. With regards to overall culture or climate, the mind-state of tearing down leads to a culture that tends to be treacherous, predatory, chaotic and fragmented. The

mind-state of building up leads to a political culture that is stable, collaborative, civil and solid.

Functional communities tend to share the following characteristics. First, while there are times and places where obstacles are in the way and must be torn down for the community to move forward, functional communities tend to use the mind-state of tearing down sparingly and for short duration. Second, the overwhelming bias is towards searching for understandings, alliances and commitments. Third, these understandings, alliances and commitments are additive and accumulate across time. Fourth, there is an aversion to quick fixes and easy solutions. Fifth, the overall climate is one of patience and change through incremental growth as the community moves gradually, but steadily, towards its stated objectives.

6. Managing Problems Versus Leading Through Crises

In addition to pursuing its goals and objectives, communities encounter unforeseen problems and crises. Problems are defined as isolated obstacles and challenges. Problems are appropriately "managed" and their management does not necessarily involve the community as a whole and does not affect basic practices. Crises threaten the mission or existence of the community and require the involvement of the entire community, as well as, significant sacrifice and restructuring.

Functional communities readily identify both problems and crises and flexibly alternate between management and leadership. Less functional communities ignore problems until they become crises. They get stuck managing when they should be leading or leading when they should be managing. Cliques can resist both management initiatives and the restructuring inherent in leadership.

7. In Charge Versus Not in Charge

Not all members of a community are endowed with equal authority. Some members, by virtue of their formal assignments, are in charge of specific decisions, responsibilities and domains. Functional communities recognize and respect that certain members of the community are vested with formal authority. Functional communities tend to be practical about the need for authority and explicit about both the existence of these authorities, as well as, their limits. Less than functional communities either overemphasize authority, creating glorified "cult of authority," or disguise it, creating confusion and discord.

8. A Sense of Yet Versus a Sense of Already

Both individuals and communities maintain a balance between what is already known, already possessed, and already done and what is yet to be known, yet to be possessed and yet to be done. Functional communities, while aware of their history and accomplishments, are centered in a spirit of "yet." This might include a sense of the department yet to be, opportunities yet to be realized, or of excellence yet to be achieved. A sense of "yet-ness" encourages openness, curiosity and an overall orientation towards the future.