

**Mary Lou Higginson. (1996). *Communication Skills for Department Chairs*. Boston, MA: Anker Publishing Company. Pp. xxx; 284; Price: \$34.95 US.**

Reviewed by Robert R. O'Reilly, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary.

It has been a pleasure to read this most useful and well-written book. Every faculty officer, including department chairs and deans should have a copy. Academic vice-presidents should also read a copy and then pass it along to staff in that office. This is clearly the best text on the role of the department chair currently available and easily surpasses the other books on the market in terms of clarity and power. As a department chair or equivalent for seven years and a faculty officer for an additional two years, I can attest that most problems faced by chairs are covered in a clear and direct manner in this book. Although many people and groups set policies within a university, by and large the task of translating those policies into action are the chairs of departments. A good university is one that has a cadre of good chairs.

The book has a consistent format. Each section of the text has an objective, a discussion of basic principles or theory and then a section on putting the ideas into practice through the medium of cases. At each pause in the case, there are a set of questions for the reader. The questions demand that the reader think through what the issues are and what are some of responses available to a chair. At this stage the reader is usually reminded of the basic principles which were enunciated earlier. As the case progresses, the author reviews the actions of the protagonists and presents a section which reviews the basic principles which one can apply in the case. The author then leaves the reader with a final set of questions. Each chapter contains two separate cases. Each case is usually presented in two parts. Although the cases are presented in nine chapters, they can be used instructively in over 40 different types of situations to be faced by a chair. There is a complete index of all cases. This case study approach is well carried out and this book is an effective learning and demonstration tool for academic administrators.

The author is a specialist in organization communications. Thus she has conceived the text in terms of key concepts in communication theory such as perceptions and interpersonal communication processes. Underlying these concepts she places great stress on the necessity for

clarity in communications and on notions of justice and fairness (ethics) in decisions and actions undertaken by the chair. It is these latter notions which add so much to the value of this book.

Throughout the author uses plain language. Theory underlies the discussion, but readers are not burdened with footnotes and references. There are only about two dozen references in the entire text. The average reader will not be aware of all the theoretical underpinnings of the text. Those more experienced in the literature of organizational communication theory and of management will recognize the basis for the author's recommendations. The material is sound and up-to-date.

The text is divided into three major sections: (1) cultivating the department culture; (2) working with faculty; and (3) working with external groups.

The first part assists the chair to work through, by means of every day decisions, the culture and climate of the department. In the author's opinion, the common denominator in all these decisions is one of ethics. Although departmental culture and climate (how we do things around here and how people feel about the department) are influenced by the leadership style of the chair, the nature of the decision-making and communication processes must be based upon principles of fairness. In each section, the author presents a list of basic principles which are appropriate to administrative action within the university. It is the ethical principles which most impressed me. They are listed as: (1) moral sensitivity, (2) moral judgment, (3) moral motivation and (4) moral character. Paying attention to these principles as elaborated by the author will save many an administrator from a great deal of grief. Often, when making decisions, what we perceive to be a natural, unproblematic issue can, because of the institutional culture, turn out to be quite unfair to one or more of the parties concerned. For example, when a single mother has been hired as a member of the department, should the annual retreat continue to be part of a fishing trip to the favorite lodge?

There is much emphasis on honesty when guiding new members of the department through the processes of tenure and promotion. Should annual letters be vague and encouraging, or should the new professor know in definite terms what the expectations are and how the professor is progressing in the attainment of those expectations? Many a grievance has been launched and won when a department chair has been less than candid in writing annual reports. This points again to the need for clarity and honest (ethical) communication.

The other sections deal with working with the faculty (performance counseling, managing conflict and implementing change). The stages of performance counseling were introduced in the earlier sections and are elaborated on here. Conflict is defined as a natural event in human groups and is to be managed in order to attain objectives. The chair is not expected to resolve conflicts but to manage them. The change process is based on open communication and participation of those responsible for implementing the change. The last section deals with external agents: the dean, other units within the university and community partners. In each section, the emphasis is on understanding the needs of the party and preparing communication strategies that work.

If there is a shortcoming to the book, it is the lack of material dealing with relationships between department chairs and students. There is only casual mention of students in the text. If the text is to be used as a basis for workshops or study sessions with chairs, then this gap will have to be addressed with other materials.

The book presents realistic issues and gives chairs tools for dealing with them. I recognize myself in some of the cases and recognized colleagues in many others. Many times I found myself wishing that I had a guide such as Higgerson when I was confronting the day to day issues that come to a chair. I am glad that I have read the book. I strongly recommend it to others, not only to colleagues within the university, but to administrators everywhere.



**Robert Boice. (1996). *First Order Principles for College Teachers*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Co., Inc. Pp. xiv; 169; Price: \$24.95 US.**

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*First-Order Principles for College Teachers*, by Robert Boice, reads like a survival guide; not just for junior faculty, but for all of us who feel overwhelmed at times by the demands of teaching and writing. By learning how to survive well, Boice argues, we become better teachers, and we do so with less stress and strain. The central contention of Boice's book, then, is that there are ten "first-order principles" that must be