A Six-Step Guide for Department Chairs*

A major goal of the chair is to create a positive and productive department where creativity is encouraged and interactivity thrives. This often happens best when the challenges and friction that result from diversity in specialties, training, background and personality are exploited and applied to productive ends. I have identified the six steps that can help bring about better relationships and productivity in an academic unit, even with difficult people.

• **Step 1: Clarify values and expectations.** When the members of a department community have taken the time to identify what guides and inspires them, as well as the productivity and etiquette they expect of one another, it is relatively easy for a chair to confront an individual’s performance that is deviant.

• **Step 2: Follow policy.** Every campus has policy and procedures for conducting research; hiring and firing; dealing with disability, discrimination, sexual harassment; and other matters. Knowing and following these policies is essential when dealing with problem situations and people.

• **Step 3: Build trust with colleagues.** The chair who has developed a trusting relationship with the right people has little to fear when proceeding to resolve a problem with any individual. And the problem person is in fact one of the “right” people.

• **Step 4: Evaluate yourself and your perceptions.** Seriously considering whether you are partly to blame for the conduct of a colleague who exasperates you and how you might modify your thinking to deal effectively with that person can be very difficult. But examining whether you may be part of the problem is a big first step toward doing something about resolving it.

• **Step 5: Listen.** Listening effectively was the top recommendation for chairing offered by participants in the national survey. Effective listening is not easy, especially when we believe the other person is a jerk, but it can be one of the most powerful ways to find solutions to problem behavior.

• **Step 6: Take effective action.** Taking effective action could be a component of each of the previous steps, but it is so important that it warrants its own chapter. Effective action consists of being prepared and confronting challenging people with consideration and composure.