

Thoughts on administration

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"The Temptations of St Anthony", Joos van Craesbeeck, 1650

Preface

This document is an attempt to outline my approach to the most exciting part of ones career – transitioning from junior faculty to becoming an established and important part of the institutions we work for. There is plenty of advice for recent graduates about how to publish, and – to a lesser extent – how to teach¹, but very little on how to take on administrative responsibilities and perform them successfully.

I joined ESCP Europe in April 2006 and became the Director of the Master in European Business (MEB) programme in London in September 2007. After 4 years of service I will vacate this role from September 2011. This guide is a collection of insights and thoughts I have had during this period.

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¹ For my own guides see “Towards a publishing strategy” (March 2010), “Ctygeht: a guide for my students” (July 2011), and “Thoughts on Teaching” (May 2017), all available at <http://anthonyjevans.com>.

Course design

The key sign that you are moving “from junior faculty” is that you begin to think in terms of *programme* design rather than *course* design. In other words your teaching hours are beginning to reduce and you are confident with your course material such that you can do it off the shelf. To this end if I were to design a *programme*, it would probably be built around the following modules:

- Managerial economics
 - Entrepreneurship/New business ventures
 - Strategy
 - General management
- Finance
 - Analytics/Quantitative methods
 - Managerial accounting
 - Corporate finance
- Operations Management
 - IT/Management information systems
 - Supply chain management
- Marketing
 - Brand management
 - Consumer behaviour
- Leadership & Organisational culture
 - Interpersonal/intercultural skills
 - Negotiation
 - Human Resources
- Business and government
 - Law
 - Regulation
 - Macroeconomics

Another sign is that you genuinely start to feel that *sitting* exams is preferable to *writing* (and *grading*) them. Even though your last exam is a distant blur, you remember the following scene from *Gladiator*:

Marcus Aurelius: You have proven your valor once again, Maximus. Let us hope for the last time.
Maximus: There is no one left to fight, sire.
Marcus Aurelius: There is always someone left to fight.

Rules

Discretion

Attitude to colleagues (and students)

“A beautiful Japanese girl whose parents owned a food store lived near the Zen master Hakuin. Suddenly, without any warning, her parents discovered she was with child. This made her parents angry. She would not confess who the father was, but after much harassment at last named Hakuin. In great anger the parents went to the master. “Is that so?” was all he would say.

After the child was born it was brought to Hakuin. By that time he had lost his reputation, which did not trouble him, but he took very good care of the child. A year later, the girl could stand it no longer. She told her parents the truth – that the real father was a young man who worked in the fishmarket.

The mother and father of the girl at once went to Hakuin to ask his forgiveness, to apologise at length, and to get the child back. Hakuin was willing. In yielding the child, all he said was, “Is that so?””

From Finkel, D.L., 2000. *Teaching with your mouth shut*, Heinemann (p.12)

Just the facts?

Atul Gawande's bestseller *Being Mortal* does a great job of explaining a major failure of modern medicine. When patients are in a difficult situation (such as finding out that they have a terminal illness) they tend to be confused and frightened. What they often need is comfort and reassurance. But this is difficult and medical practitioners are not trained to provide it. Often, they will instead provide technical jargon (e.g. it's a metastatic cancer of the lymphatic system); an abundance of abstract information (e.g. there is a new drug that might help); or false hope (e.g. plenty of people survive for more than 1 year). An unwillingness to confront the problem in their terms, and an inability to guide the patient, means that they do not get the response they need.

I see parallels when dealing with students. If a student has failed an exam it is easy to say "you got the question on price discrimination wrong", "go back through the course material, especially chapter 10" or "I'm sure if you revise you'll be fine". If the issue is a personal problem, we say "this is a legitimate reason for a student absence", "you need to send a copy of the death certificate to the Programme Office" and "I'm sorry to hear it". If it's a disciplinary issue we become even more bureaucratic and automated. Gawande discusses some techniques to go beyond this and generate a sincere dialogue.

One suggestion is simply to say: "I am worried":

"They were such simple words, but it wasn't hard to sense how much they communicated. I had given her the facts. But by including the fact that I was worried, I'd not only told her about the seriousness of the situation, I'd told her that I was on her side – I was pulling for her".

Another idea for when you're talking about bad news is to "ask, tell, ask":

Ask what they want to hear, tell them what you need to, then ask what they understood.

See Gawande, A., 2014, *Being Mortal*, Profile Books (p. 206-207)

Department chair

My interest in monasticism stems from the tangencies with the culture of scholarship: seeking space for contemplation, but meeting regularly for communal activities (e.g. reading groups). The unfortunate paradox was that the more famous the hermit, the greater his following. You flee society in search of serenity but you look out the window one day to find a community forming itself around you – you cease being a good monk, you are now the abbot. Or, in academic terms, the Department Chair:

“While the *starets* dictated a letter, visitors would begin little-by-little to approach his [*St Ambrose of Milan*²] quarters... He would not even succeed in finishing a needed letter before the crowd had begun to knock at the door and ring the little bell which he had installed outside his cell. The cell-servant would come out to them. They would ask to be announced and he would usually answer: ‘The *starets* is busy.’ Soon the impatient visitors would begin ringing and knocking again; again would come the same request and again the same answer. But the more they waited the more the impatience of the visitors would increase and they would begin to murmur... [As a break] Without dismissing his visitors, Ambrose would go to the cell adjoining his. There, half-lying at the table because of exhaustion, he would eat a meal which consisted of two dishes... his dinner would last ten or fifteen minutes during which time his cell-servants would continue to ask questions about various persons and receive answers”³

² Full name was Alexander Mikhailovich Grenkov, a.k.a “Ambrose”; he was the sole starets/monk of Optina

³ John B. Dunlop, *Staretz Amvrosy: Model for Dostoevsky’s Staretz Zossima*, Belmont, Maa. 1972

Quotes on leadership

Brother: Some brothers have come to settle near to me; do you want me to give them orders?

Abba Poemen: No! you must first act, and then, if they want to live, they will watch you

Brother: But they themselves want me to command them

Abba Poemen: Not at all! Be a model for them, not a lawgiver

“Half the harm that is done in this world is due to people who want to feel important. They don't mean to do harm-- but the harm does not interest them. Or they do not see it, or they justify it because they are absorbed in the endless struggle to think well of themselves.”

T. S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 111.

“There is a great deal of evidence that almost all organizational structures tend to produce false images in the decision-maker, and that the larger and more authoritarian the organization, the better the chance that its top decision-makers will be operating in purely imaginary worlds. This perhaps is the most fundamental reason for supposing that there are ultimately diminishing returns to scale.”

Kenneth Boulding “The economics of knowledge and knowledge of economics”, *American Economic Review*, 56, May 1966, p7

“An employer has no business with a man's personality. Employment is a specific contract calling for a specific performance... any attempt to go beyond this is usurpation. It is immoral as well as an illegal intrusion of privacy. It is abuse of power. An employee owes no ‘loyalty’, he owes no ‘love’ and no ‘attitudes’ – he owes performance and nothing else”.

Peter Drucker, *Management: Tasks Responsibilities Practices* (1974)

Chairing a meeting

1. Ask people to note their views in advance
2. Give introverts advanced warning but call on them first
3. Don't let authority dominate (e.g. use reverse order of seniority)
4. Appoint a Devil's Advocate if necessary
5. Solicit debrief memos

“Meeting Up”, *The Economist*, April 4th 2015.

Reforms

“Do reforms in a way that you can administrate”

Mart Laar, cited in James Morrison, “Watching the Russians...” *The Washington Times*, June 2nd 1997

Promotion

Be the most productive person in your department:

- Make it impossible for others to be promoted without them promoting *you*
- Learn what you need to do and then do it

Spend minimal time engaged in office politics. Yes, you need to know the “system” and to network intelligently, but favours you might grant are rarely repaid and you can quickly lose sight of your goal. You benefit your institution by being the best scholar, and the best teacher, and the best colleague you can be. Strive on all fronts.

Changing the process

1. Is this proposal an improvement on the status quo?
2. Do the expected marginal costs of further discussion outweigh the expected marginal benefits?

If Yes/Yes then *get on with it.*