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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Rookie in the Room

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Blog Series: Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda

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Who has the power in this faculty meeting, and what does that mean for me? As a new hire in our graduate school of theology, I didn't formulate these questions explicitly as I went to my first faculty meeting, but I certainly carried these questions within me.

As a kid, my family and I moved a lot and I found myself in places ranging from the cosmopolitan environment of an international school in Singapore to the insular environment of a small town in North Dakota where most of my high school classmates had been together since kindergarten. I developed keen antennae for picking up the cultural norms of a new setting. And these antennae were fully extended as I sat in my first faculty meeting in my first fulltime academic appointment. What did it mean to be considered a good colleague here? What was a new hire expected to say or not say? Where were the alliances, and how might I engage or stay out of them? How was power distributed?

The ways I participated in that first faculty meeting were directly connected to my cultural background. I am a hybrid. My father is from Malaysia and is of Sri Lankan Tamil descent. My mother grew up on a farm in North Dakota and is of German and Scottish descent. While we lived in both Malaysia and North Dakota (among other places) as I was growing up, it was my Malaysian cultural background that most shaped my initial participation as a new member of the faculty.

I came in with the assumption—an assumption I was only vaguely conscious of at the time—that I should remain quiet because I was the newest member of the faculty by several years and I was the second-youngest member of the faculty. I came in with a sense that I

should defer to others and should frame any comments I did make as humble suggestions, explicitly qualified with reference to my limited insight because I was new.

I am now in my sixth year on this faculty, and as I reflect back on that first fall term, if I were to do it again I would adjust this and some related assumptions.

I didn't know then that the faculty I am on is actually quite open to the ideas of new colleagues. I have seen this as other new colleagues have come on board. These more recent hires don't necessarily share my cultural assumptions about how a new hire should behave (mainly keep quiet), and they were not called to task verbally or nonverbally for speaking up. In fact, their participation has been welcomed and valued. I could have been more relaxed and participatory from the start!

On a related note, I have come to see that the strength of one's influence or power is not as directly tied to age and longevity on the faculty as I had thought. I have come to see that just because a person has been here a long time or has a lot to say does not necessarily mean that this person has great sway with the faculty as a whole. In some cases this has proved true while in others it has not. Longevity of employment is a factor, but I've found that much greater weight is given to a well-reasoned perspective, regardless of who makes it. In terms of how power is used, I have not felt senior faculty trying to throw their weight around (and for colleagues on my faculty who might be reading this, I mean that figuratively—I'm not commenting on anyone's physique!). I've heard stories from friends at different institutions who have had negative experiences in this regard, so I note this about my setting with gratitude.

Early on I wasn't tuned in to the fact that I would live for years with the ramifications of program decisions, and therefore I should be active in related conversations and meetings. Recently I've had a colleague closer to retirement say to me, "You're the one who's going to have to live with this decision." This came as an invitation to push on an issue and as a gracious acknowledgment that the mantle would be passed to a younger generation of scholars. These decisions will affect me and so I should proactively join in shaping them.

Power is always in play in any social setting. Sometimes it is picked up and used gently and wisely, while other times it may be wielded like a sledge hammer. I've shared some of the ways I viewed and experienced power and ways my perspectives on the distribution of power have shifted since my first months on the faculty. How have you experienced and navigated power within your faculty? How do your cultural background and the culture of your institution relate to your perceptions and use of power within your faculty? I know these might be difficult questions to answer honestly in a public forum, but let's see where it goes!

<https://wabash.center/2013/02/rookie-in-the-room/>

