The academic advisor should spend less time handing out forms, providing elementary direction, etc. This does not mean that an advisor should not be knowledgeable about the aforementioned tasks, but when the advisor's time is limited, the advisor should be interacting with a student at the analytical level, rather than the elementary information level.

Along with the emphasis being placed on the analytical nature of academic advising, the advisor must be prepared to discuss the personal needs of the student, keep abreast of current employment trends, be accessible to the student and always give the student his/her undivided and sincere attention.

Advising: Small Wins in Institutional Development

HOWARD C. KRAMER, *Director, Research and Planning Divison of Campus Life, Cornell University*

Improvements in advising programs are elements of institutional development, and they may be seen as central to the mission of the institution rather than as peripheral service entities that happen to take place on campus. However, if improving advising programs is a part of insitutional development, then "small wins" are necessary to solve the problems of the institution.

There are three propositions that are applicable to most institutions. They are:

1. There is a need to improve (change) our advising system
2. The most important agenda item for an institution is to promote continued development of the faculty, and
3. Advising may serve as a means of facilitating faculty development

Are these propositions problems or wishful thinking; what happens when we entertain such notions? Karl Weick recently published an article that is very useful in this regard.[1] He suggests that people often define social problems in ways that overwhelm their ability to do anything about them. That is, the problem is experienced as such a massive undertaking that the resulting arousal, or anxiety, disarms or disables the potential problem-solver. When social problems are described this way, the effort to convey their gravity undermines the very resources for thought and action necessary to change them.

If the three propositions stated above are defined as massive social problems they may be stated as follows:

- Improving academic advising means investing more resources, which draws funds

[1] K.E. Weick, Small wins: Redefining the scale of social problems, *American Psychologist, 39*, 1984, pp. 40-49.

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away from other priorities, and leads to an even lower attractiveness rating for the institution among potential applicants.

- To promote faculty development, institutions must increase means of assessment/evaluation, which alienates many faculty members, and further fragments the academic community.
- Using advising as a means of faculty development leads to a focus on faculty needs, with student needs being relegated to an even lower priority.

One's initial reaction to these propositions, however well-intended the motivation, is to be overwhelmed with the complexity, difficulty and obstacles; in short, the hopelessness of achieving the consequence implied by the propositions.

The reaction has been observed in many faculty meetings or workshops, when someone advances a proposition for change, and shortly thereafter, a wave of pessimism and apprehension, fueled by a variety of nefarious comments, figuratively lashes the body fore and aft for overlooking the folly of such a grandiose vision. Or, while talking with colleagues, someone mentions the critical need to improve advising at the institution, and they just smile and suggest a new topic of conversation.

Is there a way out? Weick suggests, yes, become more concerned with "small wins," because a small win is a concrete, complete and implemented outcome of moderate importance.

According to Weick,[2] a strategy of small wins addresses larger problems, by working directly on their construction and indirectly on their resolution. Four examples of small-win strategies follow: First, once a small win has been accomplished, forces are set in motion that favor another small win. Maybe advisors have seen this in their own institution, where one group or office begins to do something differently, and the intergroup relationships within the college are influenced or affected. Second, a series of small wins can be gathered in to a retrospective summary, a score card of progress, that will suggest a pattern of development, because small wins are snapshots of behavior. When they are laid out, the pattern becomes a review of historical events, not a preview of possible or projected political outcomes. Third, small wins provide information that facilitates learning and adaptation. They are like mini-experiments that uncover both resources and barriers that were invisible before the situation was disturbed. Fourth, a series of small wins is more structurally sound than a large win, because small wins are stable building blocks. Each is a unit unto itself, it stands alone, solid, complete, comprehensible. Once the mortar is provided, these units become bricks that can turn into a mighty stout wall.

Successive small requests are more likely to produce compliance, for example, a request for a person to meet with another for 20 minutes has more chance of succeeding that trying to garner attendance by that party at a special, late-afternoon, faculty meeting. Also, when positions are slightly different from one's own they have a better chance of influencing one's own point of view. For example, theories are deemed interesting when they disconfirm assumptions held with moderate intensity. People whose positions are close to one's own usually become the targets of intense persuasion, while those with positions that are further away are dismissed, isolated, or derogated.

[2] Weick.

The point that Weick makes is, that the incremental phenomena of small wins have a basic compatibility with human preferences for learning, perception, and motivation. However, just when people feel most encouraged to do something about a problem, they become least capable of translating that growing optimism into detailed diagnoses and complex responses. They become disabled by their optimism becaue it intensifies the perceived uncertainty of outcomes; it's the "I don't know if I can make it work" syndrome. Or other factors intrude, "There's no money, no time, no support from the administration; students wouldn't come, wouldn't appreciate the effort; or I might not be able to pull it off." Once the gap between ability and demand begins to narrow, e.g. "Maybe I *could do* something different when I advise," it is crucial that people see how their abilities can unequivocally *exceed* demands in order to remove some uncertainty. This assurance of success is precisely what people begin to feel when they define their situation as one of working for a small win. When a large problem is broken down into a series of small wins, three things happen:

1. The importance of any single win is reduced in the sense that the costs of failure are small;
2. The size of the demand itself is reduced, e.g. "All we will do in this session is learn how better to refer student," and,
3. Existing skills are perceived as sufficient to deal with the modest demands that will be confronted.

In summary, a small win reduces importance — "This is *no* big deal;" small win reduces demands — "That's *all* that needs to *be* done;" and, a small win raises perceived skills — "I can do at *least* that."[3]

Many administrators and advisors have experienced this phenomenon in various planning groups. As long as the topic is abstract and conceptual, people are midly supportive of the idea, but pessimistic about the feasibility of achieving such ends, and lacking in energy or excitement about the possibilities of success. Later, however, when planning focuses on more specific parameters, one can feel the energy level of the group increase, and the excitement for change builds, and the resistance to stress decreases.

Research on resistance to stress also underlines the soundness of the strategy of small wins. Kobasa, (1979, 1982) states that *personal hardiness* is composed of commitment, control and challenge. *Commitment* refers to involvement and a generalized sense of purpose that allows people to impose meaning on things, events, and persons. *Control* is the tendency to feel and act as if one can have a definite influence on situations through the exercise of imagination, knowledge, skill and choice. *Challenge* is the belief that change is an incentive to growth rather than a threat to security.[4]

Deliberate cultivation of a strategy of small wins (a) infuses situations with comprehensible and specific meaning (gives commitment to the task), (b) reinforces the perception that people can exert some influence over situations (so they feel they have some control), and, (c) produces changes of manageable size that serve as incentives to expand the repertory of skills (people are challenged to grow).

An experience in advisor training, that incorporated many of the consequences of small

[3] Weick.

[4] S.C. Kobasa, Stressful life events, personality, and health: An inquiry into hardiness, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37,* 1979, pp. 1-11.

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wins that are being examined is presented as an example:

One college organized a training workshop for advisors, the senior faculty at the institution. During the workshop each advisor conducted an advising session with a "pretend" student (actually one of the professional counselors at the college). Each session was done live in front of the group, videotaped, and each taped session was reviewed by the group.

To view the experience as a challenge may be an understatement. In talking privately with each of the advisors some time after the workshop, several points stood out:

1. All the advisors were anxious about their performance before, during, and after the sessions.
2. All felt they had learned a good deal about themselves and felt more confident and competent.
3. Both for individuals and the entire group, the workshop experience had strengthened their *commitment* to their role, sharpened their sense of *control*, and raised their expectations for the types of *challenges* that were yet to come.

One of the topics the group talked about in depth, was how the group could use the reality of its own existence, and the competence each member felt as an individual, to orchestrate other small wins for advising within the context of that institution. How do small wins in advising help improve the institution? Weick said small wins build order into unpredictable environments. Most "reality" surrounding institutional problems is disorganized, fragmented, and piecemeal. The average institution's response to problems such as attrition, retention, the budget crunch, equal rights, racism, financial aid, or other pressing problems, is interesting and in some instances chaotic may be more descriptive.[1]

This description of organizational reality is analagous to the successful hockey or basketball team. The "good" teams have a plan, a strategy, a style, that makes the most of their player resources and they stick to it resolutely. The "poor" teams don't have a plan, a strategy, a style; don't have a good match between their plan and their resources; and can't stick to their plan; and start to "run around" to their detriment. Working for small wins provides some measure or order in a turbulent environment.

A small win is a bounded, comprehensible, plausible scenario that holds together sufficiently for people to presume in advance that a forthcoming situation will be orderly; for example, a small win such as a regular meeting of department chairs on advising topics, though orderly, has impact elsewhere. Although actions associated with small wins are brief, specific, and localized, they can have a deterministic effect on many problem situations, since these situations are often less coherent than the actions directed at them.

An illustration of this point is when a committee in the college revised an instrument used to gather students' assessments of courses and teaching. The activity resulted in a change in the format, procedures, and policies of the college regarding course evaluation. Now other colleges in the university are interested in the topic, and request to use the instrument, the procedures, or processes, and to review their own policies. This outcome never could have been accomplished with any sort of a frontal attack, but one "small win" made other things possible.

[1] Weick.

This leads to another advantage of small wins. Since they are small, and dispersed, they are harder to find and attack than a big win that is noticed by everyone and tends to polarize the community. Also, because someone's small win is someone else's small loss, the stakes are reduced, which encourages the losers to bear their loss without disrupting the social system. People can accept a specific outcome even if they disagree with the values which spawned it or the goals toward which it is directed. In most cases, institutional outcomes are seldom the result of clear decisions or clear problems. More often, these outcomes are the products of, that is, are constructed or built from, bits and pieces of action, policy, advice, and information that are lying about the institution. Since small wins are of a size that lets them supplement rather than dominate policy, they are more likely to be incorporated than are other, more conspicuous, solutions.

What does the small wins approach mean to administrators and advisors?

First, it means that they must have some general idea of where the future is and what it holds. Five years from now, what would an ideal advising program look like at their institution?

Second, it means being realistic about the priorities, and the politics, at the institution. For example, if the institution places research and publication above everything else, it's probably not realistic to assume that a concerted lobbying effort about the value of advising is going to change that fact.

Third, it means creating, or maintaining, a mechanism that helps the administrator think about, and understand, the dynamics of small-win scenarios, as well as how each small win is connected to other small wins. The successful coach, or administrator, or politician, is one who plans with one eye on the approaching event, problem, or contest, and the other eye on the next season, the next budget cycle, or the next election.

Finally, it means approaching the propositions with a strategy that enables, rather than disables, the participants. Another look at the propositions is in order:

1. There is a need to improve (that is, change) our advising system.
2. The most important item for the institution is to foster faculty development.
3. Advising may serve as one means of facilitating faculty development.

Now if a proposition is defined as an expression of anything which is capable of being believed, doubted, or denied, it follows that the hope for attaining an outcome lies in the proposition being believable, thus, achievable.

Changing the scale of a problem, such as those identified by the three propositions, can change the quality of the resources that are directed toward it.

Seeing a situation as a serious problem that requires a larger win, for instance, *the institution must improve its advising system,* may actually initiate the problem. If people work for something concrete, and have an opportunity for visible success, from which they can draw confidence; and if people can translate their excitement and optimism into immediate action; then, a small win is probable, as is their heightened interest in attempting a second win. Go for the small wins. Remember, it's a string of small wins that leads to the Super Bowl, the World Series, or the Gold Medal. Good luck.

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