

Advancing Faculty Excellence Episode Six: Proactive New Leader with Dr. Robin Queen

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Welcome to Advancing Faculty Excellence, a podcast where we at the U of M ADVANCE Program talk about issues facing faculty and what we can do about it. Hi, I'm Mike Liemohn, your host and one of the Associate Directors of the U of M ADVANCE Program.

Kelsey Arras:

And I'm Kelsey Arras, podcast producer and a Communications and Project Specialist at the ADVANCE Program who oversees the RISE Committee.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Our guest today is Professor Robin Queen, the Sarah G. Thomason Collegiate Professor of Linguistics here at U of M. She talked to us about being a proactive new leader in an academic space.

Kelsey Arras:

She is definitely highly qualified to talk about being a new leader.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Yeah, she's been chair of two different departments here and served on RISE when this climate case study was written. The specific scenario for this climate case study is this: How to foster respect and inclusion in your unit when you are a new chair in a department where there is room for improvement in the culture for respect and inclusion.

Kelsey Arras:

I think what was great about this episode is that Robin describes that there's no one way to be a proactive leader, and you can always utilize the many resources around you to progressively make changes in your department.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

I completely agree. Lots of good advice in here. We hope you enjoy the show. Our guest today is Robin Queen, the Sarah G. Thomason Collegiate Professor of Linguistics, as well as a professor in Linguistics, German Languages and Literatures, Communication and Media, and English Language and Literature here at the University of Michigan. She has been chair of both the Communication and Media departments and Linguistics departments. Also, she is an Arthur F. Thurnau Professor, which is a prestigious title here at U of M, given for excellence in undergrad teaching. She also served on the RISE Committee just a few years ago. Robin, welcome to the show.

Dr. Robin Queen:

Welcome back. I'm glad to be here. It's nice to be with you, Mike and Kelsey.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Yeah, our topic today is how to be the proactive new leader in an academic space. Robin, what's your connection to this topic?

Dr. Robin Queen:

Well, as you mentioned, I was on the RISE Committee from 2019 to about 2024, and in fact had a hand in writing the case study that we're talking about today. And also I've been a department chair, as you mentioned in two different departments have had various kinds of opportunities to explore ways of being a proactive leader.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

I really like the way that one of the readings for this topic, the "10 Small Steps for Department Chairs to Foster Inclusion", which was an article Inside Higher Ed. The tagline below the title is this, "In times of crisis it becomes more important than ever as stress can cause intended leaders to resort to bias and exclusion." This article is from June 2020, so a few months into the COVID Pandemic,

But I think academia is under another period of stress right now, and so I think that today's topic is particularly timely. Could you tell us more about the advice in this article?

Dr. Robin Queen:

I can. I mean, it's an interesting article because it's set up in terms of how you foster positive climates in units like a department. So it's focused on how you can do small things to enhance the climate in a particular unit without making big grand gestures. So the idea is the sort of day-to-day small steps you can take that make things better for people in the department. You have to keep in mind what is a department climate, and the way I've thought about it and a little bit the way they talk about it as well is that people in the department feel like they belong and that they feel like they're being treated fairly. Then the other thing that they don't talk about so much in this article, but I think is very important to remember as a new leader is that your department is not just your faculty.

If you're a department chair, it includes especially the staff, the professional staff. It can include students in a whole variety of ways, especially graduate students. So as a department chair, I think it can be tempting at the very beginning to think you're there for the faculty and of course you are, but there is an important role for you to play as well in keeping faculty apprised of how the professional staff also work, what they contribute, and many of the climate issues that are discussed can be tied to that relationship. So some of what this article, and I won't go through each of the 10 things, but it's ideas like being present for people, talking to people one-on-one, making sure the space is an inviting space and an inclusive space, which means making sure that people can see themselves in the spaces that they're in. Making sure you have looked through processes, especially processes tied to resources.

Could be salary, it could be research funds, making sure that the processes are equitable and that you're transparent about them. Inviting people to give research stocks or having small get togethers and things like that that give people an opportunity to be together, but also to celebrate each other. I think the small steps you can do as a department chair, especially a new one, is whatever you can to find spaces where people can be together and be supportive of each other. So this article is really about those small steps and that if you have that in mind when the crisis hits, hopefully you've got it enough in your muscle memory that you just keep doing those things while also recognizing the crisis that you're in.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Thank you. Thank you very much. We had an additional resource listed at the end of the climate case study, which was a guide to department chairs from the University of Wisconsin, fairly short guide, but it is a long list of action items.

Dr. Robin Queen:

So I mean, it's interesting, these two articles are pretty similar. I think the "Enhancing Department Climate" study is focused a little bit more on fixing climates that may be in trouble. It's noticing the various sources of trouble for climate, so things like people not feeling respected or not feeling like they belong, communication that isn't transparent or is chaotic. And I mean, one of the things I found interesting in this article is they made a particular point about the need to recognize people's lives outside of the department. I mean, it's sometimes called work-life balance. I think that can in some ways undermines what's actually being talked about here, and I think it's more that academic culture can be an all consuming one for everyone, and that part of it is recognizing that you're not cheating on the academy if you do something else. Some of the challenges that can arise when you have great faculty from groups of people who are underrepresented in your discipline or who may represent parts of the discipline that aren't sort of the hottest, newest thing, and this will often disproportionately include women and scholars of color.

Thinking about how you retain them as a function of improving climate is a lot what this article is talking about.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Yeah, there's a lot packed in there, right? Yeah, I really like how it was organized by the headers that way to categorize so that, "Oh, I have this issue, I can go. And there's the list of actions." This brings us to our specific scenario for today's conversation. In these climate case studies, the RISE Committee likes to formulate a particular situation to help personalize the more general full topic that we're talking about. So for today, we have this: How to foster respect and inclusion in your unit when you are a new chair in a department where there is room for improvement in the culture for respect and inclusion. Another mainstay of the RISE Committee is the use of Project Zero's concept of the "Eight Levers of Action." So this is a rubric for addressing a situation for many different angles. So we're going to go through the levers and then we're going to go through it in order that first addresses the topic at the systemic level and then of how a department could address it and then end at the personal level of individual actions and choices. Okay?

Dr. Robin Queen:

Sounds good.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

The expectations lever is about the cues that a group gives off either explicitly or implicitly to set the norms of group dynamics. Robin, what are some examples of how a new leader might use this lever to reset and adjust department climate?

Dr. Robin Queen:

So the one I was thinking about that I think is the most obvious, and it is unfortunately mostly faculty centric, and that's around setting annual raises and doing the assessment of faculty's annual reports. So having an expectation that some unit, usually it's an executive committee, is

Going to play a critical role in assessing faculty colleagues. So faculty turn in at least into the college, I don't know if this is true everywhere, but faculty turn in an annual report that lists out whatever they've done for the year and then setting the expectation that people on the executive committee will be the ones to evaluate that, that everybody knows that that's what's happening. So I've been familiar with units where people had no idea how their annual reviews were done or what mattered or what didn't matter, other units where you had point by point assignments of things. Both of those I think can be challenging. I mean, anyone who's ever used a rubric knows if you use a rubric, you lose some of the holistic nature of the review. And for faculty, all kinds of different things can be going on in a year depending on where they are in their careers. And so being able to take a holistic view I think is important, and telling people that's what you're doing. The expectation is we know you do lots of different things and that you have different stages in your career, and we want to recognize all of those.

It's not only research focused. Research is of course for faculty an important component, but as faculty move through their careers, other things also become important and being able to set the expectation that that's okay, that we recognize that and that it's valuable. So the expectation that doing really great teaching is valuable, talking to the public is valuable so that everyone knows those are things that academics are expected to do. And then also being very clear about how as a chair, I mean as a chair, your responsibility is to set salaries, but being as clear as you can about how you're doing that. I tended to be someone who made decisions. I looked, especially for people who were making less than they should relative to their degree years, I tried as much as possible for untenured faculty salaries to go up as much as possible. Senior faculty don't always love that, but I could make clear that my expectation was, and that their expectation of me should be that I am looking out for those who are paid the least. Unless there, I mean obviously other kinds of merit and things like that come into play, but for me, it was really about looking especially towards equity, and recognizing the vast range of things that people do.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

And I like that emphasis on transparency and telling people this is how I'm doing it

Dr. Robin Queen:

And that they can expect that of me. So it's both what are the expectations we hold of each other, but then also as a department chair in particular, what expectations is it fair for the members of the department to have on me and let them tell me that I expect you to do this, and either say, okay, I can do that, or say, these are the reasons that may not be possible. But that the notion of expectations flows in all directions.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

That's a good point. Back forth. Yeah. One lever we have is environment, and this is about the physical or virtual cues that we have to signal particular directions in which the department wants to go. And in this one, it's really the directions of culture for that department. Robin, could you give us a few examples of using environment?

Dr. Robin Queen:

So I mean, I think the one that comes up, just having the space look nice. So having clean carpet, having freshly painted walls, having a space that people feel good in is one way to help people feel like it's a space they want to be in. I mean, in one of the units I was in, we did a beautification exercise where we asked all the people in the department, if you have a really cool photograph, give it to us. And we blew those up and hung them on the wall.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Oh yeah,

Kelsey Arras:

That's so nice.

Dr. Robin Queen:

So these were things and we had little cards that explained what it was, and it is just a way in which the people in the department could see reflections of not only themselves, but other people in the department too. So I think making a space feel like your own is an important thing and you always can do it. One of the things I think as a chair that struck me is you can do anything. People may not like it and you may not keep it or whatever, but there's not really that much, I mean, there are some constraints, but you can do a lot of different things in the space. So those are the kinds of things I think the environment that you can make sure everyone can be included in a space where they have been invited, and also making sure the environment looks nice and feels good.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Yeah, a care towards positivity. I like that. Our next lever is opportunities. This is about using a potentially bad situation as a launching point for positive change, or in this case, the newness of the leader in their position as the launching point. So Robin, what are some ways that a new leader could take advantage of the newness of their role to foster a positive workplace climate?

Dr. Robin Queen:

You can do the most as a chair at the very beginning because you've got a lot of goodwill. People are interested in seeing what you'll bring. You have to be careful not to change too much or want to change too much all at once. So you really do have the chance to make big kinds of changes, get buy-in for those changes. I think the most important thing, the most important opportunity you have as a new chair is actually talking to individual people one-on-one, really going around and finding out, it seems like this has been an issue for a long time. Can I get your perspective on it? Or I've been here for 30 years and so maybe I'm not noticing these things. What do you notice and what would you like to see change or what would you like to see not change?

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Taking that opportunity just to make the round.

Dr. Robin Queen:

To make the rounds, show people that you know them, that you recognize them, that you value what they have to say, that you see them as in some ways equal to you, which they are. You're all part of a unit that has a particular kind of mission. And so asking people and making sure it's not just the faculty that you're asking, that you really are talking to all the staff, that you know the staff, you have the opportunities to show a kind of respect to everyone in the unit. I think the newness gives you both the goodwill from everyone to try bold things if that's what you want to do, and also to show people that you mean it when you say, "I value your opinion, I want to hear it. I want to take it into account. I want to know what you think." The newness itself is really an opportunity to do that and get a different understanding of a unit that you may have thought you knew very well. It's really also a place where you can show those who may be minoritized in different ways in terms of their own demographics or in terms of the fields they represent or their interdisciplinarity or a whole range of things. You can show them, "I want to hear what you have to say", and then follow through. Do the things that you can and that people have mentioned to you.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

There's so much more to people's lives than just the little bit you might know about them already. It's really important to offer them that chance to open up and maybe there's something that's been itching on their mind and they want to have that chance to release it into somebody of authority that could do a change for it. And you give them that opportunity. That's really nice.

Dr. Robin Queen:

And it's also an opportunity to ask people what are things you're doing that you feel like you're not being recognized for? So it is one way to acknowledge what is sometimes called invisible service that disproportionately tends to land on faculty of color, women faculty, women identified faculty, or any number of different kinds of people, and you can ask about that, which shows both that what happens and that you want to be able to take it into account in some way or to help in some way if the person needs help. So I think those are real opportunities that newness gives you.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Making it less invisible.

Dr. Robin Queen:

Right right, because of course it's not invisible to the person doing it.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Right? Oh yeah, great point.

Dr. Robin Queen:

So it's just not visible in our reward structures necessarily. And so this also then taps back into expectations and routines and structures, but how do you capture the work that people are doing?

Kelsey Arras:

I love Robin that you talked about getting feedback also from staff. Something I've learned since working at U of M is when you're coming into a new role, a lot of times the executive assistant has been there a long time and they've been through many chairs, and I think that they have such a great expertise, and so I really appreciated that you highlighted that as truly an opportunity. Maybe you've worked in that department, but this person has worked on kind of the everyday cogs and wheels kind of things.

Dr. Robin Queen:

I think you also have the opportunity, if it hasn't been done in the past, to make it very clear to, especially faculty and graduate students, what the professional staff's roles are and what they aren't. But I think you have at the beginning to really be a partner with the department staff and to make it clear that these are professional roles and professionals in them, many of them, they're a lot longer and know a lot of things. That recognition is really important.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Our next lever is modeling. I have a friend who worked at Ford for many years as a clay modeler, making tiny replicas of the car designs, so that other staff could see the physical dimensions and look at their creation before actually building it with metal. That's not the modeling that we're talking about here, though. This is about being a role model for others. So Robin, could you give us an example or two of how modeling could be used for this situation of a proactive new leader?

Dr. Robin Queen:

So one of the things that I think is really important for chairs to model is restraint in sending email. And in particular, I know many units, it's not true of all units, but there are many units who take the approach that particularly administrative type email should only be sent during classical business hours. And in particular, that staff should not be expected to respond to email outside of business hours or their working hours. Being a chair who follows that, even though a lot of times, of course you're up working at midnight or whatever time, you use the schedule send. So really modeling for people that you are not trying to get into their space 24 hours a day.

And you're not expecting them to respond 24 hours a day and also not responding to everything right away. So I think having a kind of email approach is one way that you can model. Going back to this idea of work-life balance. We all work in a workplace, but we're not only in the workplace. And so that is one kind of modeling. I mean, the other kind of modeling I think is being present, talking to people, recognizing people, asking people how various things are going that you know they've been working on is one way to model a kind of community feel. And then also I think it's important to model when you're on vacation, that you're on vacation.

Tell people, I'm on vacation, I'm not going to respond to you. I may see what you have to say, but I'm not going to respond if there's an emergency, here's who you talk to. So I think it's important of really showing that you can be passionate and committed to academia, but you can also take a break. And it's important to take breaks. It's important to rejuvenate yourself. And that modeling that is one way to make it clear, especially to untenured faculty, that this is in fact an expectation. We want you to be at your best as most as possible.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Especially that turning it off when you aren't in your work mode. That's hard to do when we have devices like phones or even watches that have email alerts.

Dr. Robin Queen:

I think it's also a way of trying to intervene in the notion of a kind of busyness culture and that believing that academia is a place that's worth being in, that is sustaining and invigorating. And I think it is kind of, there's an inherent way in which that's true, but it also can lead to "I'm busier than you. I'm such a busy person. I'm doing all these things all the time", all of which may be true. But I think intervening in busyness culture is also a useful strategy, and it's one I used and tried to model as much as I could.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

The lever of time is quite simply how each of us allocates the resource of our attention. For this situation, it's about using our time to communicate the values of that new leader to the rest of the people in the department. So Robin, do you have an example for us?

Dr. Robin Queen:

I think one of the things you can do with time is be very, as a person, as a chair, being present for people. Using your time to show, "I am here. Just if you want to chat". Going to sit in the kitchen for instance and work or in some open public space just to be there and say, "Come talk to me. I'm really interested." And also doing everything you can to be aware of the things that the institution is asking of other people's time.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

You mentioned the kitchen. That's a specific open space. Did you do that?

Dr. Robin Queen:

So many chair offices are sort of sequestered back behind layers

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Yeah, several layers even sometimes.

Dr. Robin Queen:

So I would try to get out of those layers. So maybe go work in my faculty office with the door open, or if there were good public spaces, just sit in them sometimes and just be there. It's hit and miss with that maybe not many people want to stop and talk to you. Showing that you're there and that you care and that you're present. Even just walking down the halls.

Some of the most interesting information I got actually in both units that I was chair of was talking to the work study students who were sitting at the sort of reception desks. I found out a lot about common problems in the department, so it was time well spent.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

The lever of interactions is about relational dynamics. For this scenario, we are really talking about fostering positive connections between people in the unit. Robin, what are some examples of how the lever of interactions could be used by a proactive new leader?

Dr. Robin Queen:

One thing is be curious about your colleagues, be interested in what they have to say and bring them into dialogue with one another, talk to several faculty at the same time, just in the hallways. I think also setting up informal moments that people can be together. We would do things like have a coffee bar for a couple hours or an ice cream bar or whatever. I mean, it sounds kind of silly, and I would always roll my eyes like an ice cream bar, seriously. But it turned out that people will come. We did a candy bar. Those are moments when people can come. I mean, it tends to be the case that the faculty stay the least amount of time. The graduate students will be there a lot, but also the faculty stay too. Setting up a little bit the field of dreams, like you build it, they will come. So building time and space for these sorts of interactions. And then even on a more formal side, having faculty or graduate students in your department give colloquia. Have spaces where the research being done in your unit can be projected out and do what you can to kind of get everyone to go, which can be challenging of course. And then the other thing that I started to notice is the informal networks that people use. The sort of chat networks like messaging networks and who's being left out.

So you start to get a sense of there's some cadre of people who are basically doing business over text message and that some people in the unit are never included on those and that that's a real disadvantage. And so thinking about what kind of interactive space that is for people and whether and how to intervene. If you really are noticing there's this one faculty member who as far as I can tell is on none of these chat things, what's that about? Paying attention to interactions that could be exclusionary, intentionally or not, I think mostly not, but we all use informal channels to figure out how to do stuff and what's going on and to create alliances and whatever. But those can have both positive and negative consequences. So thinking about those things to the degree you can.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Our last lever is language, about the word choices we make in the workplace. For a proactive new leader, the language lever focuses on how that leader chooses to vocalize support for everyone in the community. So Robin, do you have an example or two about how language could be used as a lever?

Dr. Robin Queen:

So I have to be very clear as a linguist, I think about language maybe a little differently than some others might. So one thing is about word choices. If you think about a word as a mechanism we use to sort of delineate a thing and delineate it from a different thing. So we use the word "table" to make clear you're talking about that object and not the object you're sitting in. So the words themselves, helping people be very clear about what their word choices indicate. This has been widely discussed in terms of inclusive language. You could think about things like people's pronouns. You can think about people's personal names, you can think about the signage. I mean, one of the things I like to look at was like, what are the signs on the wall? What do they say? And are they scoldy or are they not?

People don't like to be scolded, and so it can be very satisfying to scold, but it doesn't set up an inclusive friendly environment if you do that. And then I also think as a chair, you can use language in ways that can be less formal. So if you want to create a more collegial environment using language that is less academic can be a way to do that. So really thinking about how you speak. I tried pretty hard to be informal much of the time, not entirely, but I think that kind of thinking about your own presentation and tone, and again, you try things and they either land or they don't. I hope that I sounded informal to people in a way that was collegial and not in a way that seemed, I don't know, lackadaisical or something. So I think those are different ways in which you can think about language, you can think about specific words and kind of what they mean and how they are or aren't.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

We made it. Robin, this has been a fabulous conversation. Do you have any final words about supporting a new leader towards instituting positive change in their unit's climate and culture?

Dr. Robin Queen:

Yes. I mean, I think it can be really overwhelming when you're getting a lot of this kind of advice, and here you can do this thing or that thing or this other thing or this other thing. You can't do everything. You can do anything, but not everything. And so as you're hearing this stuff, don't believe that you have to do every bit of it. Even if you're dealing with a really difficult climate situation, find one or two things that you feel comfortable focusing on and do the best you can. Think your intent is a good gauge for things. And so I think always when I would read these case studies even, I would feel like, oh my god, it's so overwhelming if I did all of these things. They all seem like great ideas, but you just can't. So pick the things you can do and feel good about yourself for trying to do something better, whether you succeed or you don't. I mean, hopefully you do, but mostly you're trying something and that's good.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

Thank you. That was Robin Queen, the Sarah G. Thomason Collegiate Professor of Linguistics here at the University of Michigan who talked to us about how to be a proactive new leader. Robin, it has been a pleasure to have you on the show.

Dr. Robin Queen:

Likewise, thanks.

Dr. Mike Liemohn:

This has been an episode of the Advancing Faculty Excellence Podcast, a product of U of M's ADVANCE Program. The views expressed in this episode are those of the guests and hosts and do not reflect official positions of the University of Michigan. I'm Mike Liemohn, the host of this episode. This podcast was produced and edited by Kelsey Arras of U of M ADVANCE. Please join me extending to her a huge thank you. This podcast would not exist without her. We want to give a special thanks to our musical crew. Composition by WP Norton and performed by So Say We All! with WP Norton on lead guitar and University of Michigan, professors Alaina Lemon on rhythm guitar, and Denise Sekaquaptewa on bass guitar. We also thank the Shapiro Library Design Lab team for production support, including usage of their sound studios. Please rate review and subscribe to this podcast. Thank you all for listening.