CAREER WATCH

Up for an Interim Promotion? Learn How to Overcome the ‘Curse’ of Being the Internal Candidate

BY DAVID J. BACHRACH

You are called to the dean’s office on short notice and offered a mixed bag of news. Your department chair is leaving for a position elsewhere and your dean has asked you to assume the position on an interim basis while the institution conducts a national search.

Sound familiar? It should. The scenario gets repeated often in academic medical centers. But, while any promotion is enticing, assuming a new position on an interim basis can present additional challenges. In fact, the internal candidate may be blessed or cursed — depending on how you look at it — by several inherent disadvantages.

Overcoming Preconceived Notions

For one, other faculty and administrators may have preconceived notions about an individual with a history at the institution — remembering mistakes or problems at least as well as any successes. And, if that person has been with the institution from his or her early days as a medical student, resident, fellow, or junior professor, others may not view the person as a leader.

Then, there could be problems with recruitment, assuming the candidate has funds to hire other people. Who will want to join a department if they don’t know for whom they will be working over the longer term? In addition, if the internal candidate was perceived to be loyal to the incumbent chair, other staff may think that that individual will not bring anything new to the department.

How to Make an Interim Position Work for You

Despite these challenges, however, on balance, the experience a faculty member can gain as an interim chair will be of great benefit. Following are some strategies for getting the most out of this experience.

1. Before accepting the interim position, get a copy of the job description and ask the dean to delineate all roles, responsibilities, or authorities that are to be adjusted. Request that the dean sign it.

2. Ask the dean for an explicit, written statement of goals and objectives for the next 6 to 18 months and for a statement of off-limits or “sacred cow” issues. If possible, have the dean declare publicly that there are certain areas that you are being asked to leave alone.

3. Determine when the search for another candidate will begin. While you will be in limbo for what will seem like an interminable period of time, it may be advantageous for you to work during a six-month (or one-year) period before the search begins without being distracted by the search process. This will give you time to demonstrate your ability without others constantly compromising your intended actions during a period when other candidates are coming through.

4. Request support during this period, including regular and confidential access to the dean and other key administrators at the medical school or teaching hospital. Also, ask for financial support to take

5. Obtain complete financial statements for the department, along with a brief written statement of any concerns that must be addressed. It is a good idea for all new chairs and deans to have a comprehensive external financial audit performed of the unit. Make sure that you have the authority to act on any discovered concerns, as well as the funds to address them, either within the funds controlled by the department or as a special allocation to you as interim chair.

6. Before the search officially begins, ask for a commitment that you be given a critique by the dean (or the appropriate administrator) to assess your chances for a permanent appointment.

7. If you are told that you will not be considered for the permanent position,
Web Site Offers Guidance on Protections for Human Research Subjects

A new continuing education program on the protection of human participants in clinical research is now available online at http://cme.nci.nih.gov. Developed by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) for the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Web-based course, Human Participant Protections Education for Research Teams, responds to the mandate requiring education on human subjects protection for all investigators who apply for, or receive, NIH funds for research involving humans.

This Web site covers topics such as:
- roles and responsibilities of researchers and their key personnel including ethical principles for research;
- Federal regulations;
- informed consent;
- institutional review boards;
- ongoing protections throughout the course of the study;
- data and safety monitoring;
- reporting of adverse events;
- privacy and confidentiality; and historical events that have impacted policy and legislation.

The Web site program offers up to two hours of category 1 credit of the Physician Recognition Award of the American Medical Association.

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request written guidance that you will receive additional support for continued training and the time to obtain it. Also, you may want to initiate your formal withdrawal from being considered for the chair’s position, by asking to back out of the interim position during the period of the active search. Be sure to request a mini- or full-sabbatical — in return for your service — at the conclusion of your term with support to allow for re-entry into your former role, or a different role within the organization, should that be mutually acceptable.

Become a Serious Contender

These additional suggestions should assist anyone who wants to be a serious contender for the chair position:

1. Make site visits to other departments that are seen as leaders in your discipline, and talk to clinical and basic science leaders within your own institution about what has led to their success. Build alliances with both constituencies as they will be a source of support should you be appointed the chair, and/or a source of referral for other positions, should you not.

2. Develop a “personal manifesto” that expresses your vision for the department and relate it to the institution’s mission. It should include your values and principles, what you will expect of others; measures of current performance and concrete strategies for advancement of your department toward published benchmarks; and a clear statement of how you will lead the department in the future, including how you will differentiate yourself from your predecessor, and emulate him or her, as appropriate.

Advantages of the ‘Curse’

The so-called curse often facing the internal candidate is real but not necessarily fatal. In fact, if you are aware of the pitfalls inherent in being an internal candidate and are clearly chairmaterial, you may be able to work these challenges to your advantage. If nothing else, you can use this as an important learning experience that will likely enhance your preparedness for a similar position elsewhere, maybe even a better position.