

The Power of a Year: The Lessons of a New Professional

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It was less than a year ago when I first walked into my office at Boise State University. I had literally finished my last graduate class two weeks previous, packed up my bags, and journeyed across America. I experienced a range of emotions that day: excited because all my hard work had paid off and I was starting my first professional job and nervous because I had no clue what I was stepping into. It was now my responsibility to lead a fraternity/sorority community on my own, when two years previous I was the follower. I could hardly believe that this was my reality. So many questions filled my mind: Am I ready for this? How do I make a good first impression? Do I establish my role as authority figure with students or do I try to be their friend? So much has happened since that day. I still am excited to come to work and I now only get nervous around sorority recruitment. When I reminisce about my year, I realize I have learned three powerful lessons; the power of relationships, the power of honesty, and the power of knowledge.

The Power of Relationships

In my first few weeks at Boise State University, I was encouraged to meet as many of my constituents as I could. I set up meetings with all sorts of potential campus partners, student leaders, and chapter advisors, and made phone calls to inter/national headquarters. I affectionately called it my "welcome tour." Especially with the students, I made an effort to build a genuine relationship with them, trying to understand who they were as individuals. I spent the first few minutes of my one-on-one meetings with students focusing on what was going on in their lives. These early conversations built the foundation which allowed me to challenge them in a more honest way.

Some of the most difficult situations this past year occurred when conflict arose with people with whom I had not built relationships. In these moments I had to prove I was a person worth working alongside, rather than against. Nothing is worse than having your first conversations with an advisor, student, or organization staff person over a conduct issue. I now make a concerted effort to build these relationships before crisis happens.

The Power of Honesty

In my first few months, I tried to delicately handle opportunities to provide students with feedback. I wanted students to like me. I had been a part of communities in the past where the advisor was not well liked by the community and I saw how much resistance they faced trying to make change happen. I wanted to set the right tone and being overly critical



seemed to be the quickest path to student resistance. In those early meetings, rather than being completely honest, I would passively provide the truth. When talking with students about a poorly attended event, I would say things like “It is ok. You will do better next time,” rather than providing feedback. By letting it go, two months later the same students were back in my office with the same problem.

I realized by building genuine relationships, like I mentioned above, I had the capacity to be honest in a way that allowed me to provide critical feedback and still show I cared. Once the students trusted me, I could share the honest truth, and most students were thankful for it. I once had a meeting with newly elected chapter president, and after taking the time to get to know him, I candidly let him know the struggles I saw that his chapter faced, with no sugar coating. He actually thanked me for my blunt honesty and agreed those were areas where his chapter needed work. After that meeting, I realized honesty allows for quicker progress.

The Power of Knowledge

Having recently finished graduate school when I started the new position, I was thoroughly excited to be done with reading and homework. I had spent the majority of my life in a classroom and I was looking forward to finally reading a book or article that was not assigned. I was excited to put my brain on cruise control for a while. I soon realized how hypocritical I was with my students. I was always telling them to put school first. I was always challenging them to find and make meaning from situations and experiences. I was trying to facilitate learning moments for them, but the whole time I had stopped myself from seizing these opportunities around me. If there is one thing I have gleaned from through my experiences this year, I have learned that I need to keep learning. In order to be better for my students I need to know what is going on in this world. I need to continue to challenge myself. I need to have my answers prepared when I come to the table. This world is constantly changing. What better way to show students they need to be invested in it than by modeling the way.

In the past year I have learned many other powerful lessons, but these are the three that stand out. I believe these will be the three which I will take into my second year and the three I will continue to embrace throughout my time in the profession.