

Just a University Thing? Must-Have Insights on Systemic Conflicts in Higher Education

Newcomers transferring from other jobs and industries to university immediately feel the difference: people tick differently here! But how exactly?

Studies on higher education institutions describe university-specific structures and the resulting systemic conflicts as follows: the primary challenge is to unite two distinct organizational cultures with different operational logic under one roof. Administration and academia represent two types of organizational structure, which differ largely in purpose and approach: administration is strictly formalistic, is organized by a division of labor, and has clear top-to-bottom decision-making hierarchies, while academia is less formal and has a high degree of autonomy organizationally and procedurally. Administrative staff are subject to instruction, must observe laws and regulations, and check compliance. Their daily work routines follow rules of conduct and rely on structures, processes, and procedures. Academics, by contrast, are not ruled by rigid forms to this extent. Nonetheless, structures, roles, and task clarity are equally significant in academia. Its main emphasis, however, is on teaching and research based on a variety of creative and autonomous approaches that foster novel research findings.

Furthermore, career paths and socialization in both work areas vary due to very different challenges and requirements: Academics are encouraged to dispute approaches and methods in the name of truth. Skills for dealing with controversy, boundaries, and competition are cultivated and honed in the course of time. Dissertation and *Habilitation* procedures require academics to distinguish their work from the current research. Administration requires other indispensable skills—crafting a unique selling proposition is not particularly desired here. When the two areas meet, misunderstandings, confusion, and conflicts can occur regardless of the specific personalities involved. Assistants, for instance, may be annoyed by what they see as the professors' unreliable behavior and by the fact that they do not observe deadlines and do not consider all administrative steps that have to be completed to hire new employees. Professors, on the other hand, wish to be relieved of administrative tasks when facing too many appointments and requirements. Their heads are usually humming with lecture topics, project proposals, and articles, so they do not want to organize the team meeting and the Christmas party on top. For example, a professor may contact the work-related travel team hoping for speedy service. The person in charge, however, adheres to regulations, asks further questions, and sends forms to fill out. Partly completed forms then increase the administrative employee's workload and delay the process. When talking on the phone, their two worlds are likely to collide.

Another systemic aspect of academia is temporary leadership. Deans and department heads usually change every 2 years. Everyone leads differently. Professors stepping into leadership roles often have little prior experience in dealing with issues of leadership, communication, work organization, etc. For administrative staff, these frequent leadership changes may bring confusion or require adjustments and cause conflict, especially if their new supervisors have spent little time systematically addressing leadership before. In consultations affected staff may say:

“So far, things worked just fine, but now I'm supposed to do everything differently and my work situation has changed significantly.”

Tension is not only evident between academia and administration; there are also conflicts over resources and their distribution in university departments and institutes. Many employees identify with their work at the university and many feel strongly attached to their research topics and bonded in their aspirations for emancipation, justice, education, and democracy. This provides ground for value-based disputes driven by questions about how to deal with staff or students, etc. Common questions are as follows: How can teams support each other? What is friendly, collegial, and fair interaction?

In addition, there are conflicts related to organizational culture and clarity with regard to division of labor. Unclear roles and responsibilities can cause problems. Not all professors, for example, feel responsible for managing their employees. As a result, employees may feel under-appreciated and external conflicts between supervisors and staff or internal conflicts such as lack of motivation, etc. may arise. Freedom in research and teaching has a powerful systemic impact on the attitudes and behavior of non-academic staff as well. Last but not least, the familial nature of research groups and institutes can make direct communication difficult and create unclear roles and responsibilities.

In conclusion: understanding and recognizing systemic conflicts can help people assess situations and find good solutions early on. If multiple conflicts emerge in one place, this may also provide relief. Conflict situations are generally not caused by individuals and personal behavior only. Conflicts are everywhere, whether we like it or not, and they usually indicate an urgent need for action.

Contact the Conflict Prevention and Resolution Unit for in-depth information on this topic.

We will offer a workshop on conflict-related issues during the Diversity Days.