Personal Survival

Accept that you are – at least temporarily – an authority figure.

- Some may hint or state outright that going into academic administration means you are a lesser being. You will need to gird your loins against that kind of criticism (it is without merit) and not retreat from the responsibilities of your role in the face of it. At the same time, don’t allow your authority to make you authoritarian!

Accept that you now play a dual role.

- You advocate for and represent your faculty members to the Faculty, the Dean, the VP, whatever – AND you represent the decisions of the higher administration (for which you may be blamed) to your faculty members.

Grow a thick skin if you can.

- You will get blamed for things you haven’t done as well as those you have; discontent with decisions made at the Dean or University level may target you for not being able to stop them.

Find a confidant(e).

- Someone you can work out your aggravations with, so that you can talk yourself down before making decisions or communications.

Be aware of your own particular vulnerabilities.

- We all have them. Do you lose your temper easily? Do you speak without thinking? Do you have a strong need to please? Knowing yourself and your own tendencies can help protect you from pitfalls.

Questions yourself regularly, but don’t second-guess all your own decisions and actions.

- Pay particular attention to whether your emotional responses to people are affecting the decisions you make. Question your own motivations honestly! And when the facts lead to a place you don’t want to go, maybe you just have to go there.

Don’t be confrontational, but don’t avoid conflict when it has to happen.

It’s okay to have negative feelings.

- Don’t set impossibly high standards for yourself – none of us is a saint. The main thing is not what you think, but how you act. And pick your battles – not every disagreement is a call to arms!

Remember that the academy has a high tolerance for eccentricity.

- It can reward behaviours you may not like, such as arrogant self-aggrandizement; unfortunately, simply being an unpleasant human being is neither a breach of policy or against the law.
- At the same time, also be aware of the responsibilities of all employees under policies such as 33 (ethical behaviour) or 42 (sexual violence).
There are some people you just cannot argue with.

- This does not mean you should simply give in to them; just don’t expect that you can persuade them.

Don’t try to go it alone – ask for help.

- This is especially important if you think you are dealing with someone who may be dangerous or who may need assistance that you cannot give (e.g., mental health issues). It’s better for both you and them to be safe rather than sorry.

Be clear on expectations with everyone.

- Follow up (at least some) conversations with an e-mail to ensure that everyone is on the same page.

Write it down!

- Keep notes, especially of contentious discussions. But beware of putting items in files which should NOT be in those files.

Don’t let yourself be pressured by unreasonable demands.

- Don’t get jumped into quick or ill-informed decisions by people who like to waylay you in the hall or in the bathroom, and don’t answer *anything* right away, even if you like to be efficient.
- Remember: “poor planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on mine.”

On the other hand, don’t delay delivering difficult decisions, hard news, etc.

- It never makes the situation better, and usually makes it worse. It can also feel like a serious betrayal.

Take responsibility – but sometimes you can blame the policies or blame the Dean, etc.

- But don’t overdo this: try not to kick all your problems upstairs.

Try not to make them, but it’s okay to make mistakes.

- Own them, and try to correct them, of course. Don’t blame others.
- Remember that a lot of learning comes from our mistakes, not our successes.

If a decision between conflicting interests or evidence seems impossible, err on the side of generosity.

- The guiding principle should be the question of harm.

Cultivate a sense of humour.

- It may be your only salvation.

But it’s okay to cry.

- Just try not to do it in public. Or at least not in meetings. Especially ones you are in charge of.