



Finding Your Post-Tenure Pathway: Mind-Set Shifts for Posttenure Success

10/18/2017

[Originally posted on Inside Higher Ed.](#)

As we are heading into the final phase of the Posttenure Pathfinders series, I want to acknowledge all of you who have been following along and doing the work. You've come a long way, having spent time reflecting (asking yourself [who am I?](#) [How do I feel?](#) And [what do I love?](#)), rethinking leadership, reimagining the [many different possibilities](#) that exist for you, interviewing [a wide range of role models](#), and using all that information to [choose your posttenure pathway](#).

Before we complete the series by building a new mentoring network and planning for your success, I want to pause to make sure we move forward on a solid foundation. By that, I mean there are (often unconscious) ways of thinking that lead to success on the tenure track, where the primary goal is to win tenure. Those mind-sets may have been useful -- and even highly functional -- at the previous stage of your career, but they will silently undermine your success in this new stage if you don't identify and shift them.

Let me describe the three most common and important mind-set shifts that participants in our [Posttenure Pathfinders program](#) make. As I describe each, notice which ones resonate for you. These are by no means exhaustive or mutually exclusive. My goal in naming them is to increase your awareness of the assumptions, beliefs and ways of being that got you to tenure so you can honestly ask yourself whether you want to hold on to those mind-sets or replace them.

Shift No. 1: Moving from fearful to fearless. There are lots of ever-present fears on the tenure track. First and foremost, there's the fear that you won't be awarded tenure and you may have to go do something else with your life after 15 (or so) years of training and probation. And because the probationary period lasts for so long, that fear can become normalized as a basis for interacting with others, decision making and self-evaluation.

Fear can be a powerful motivator for productivity on the tenure track. But you have tenure now, so it's time to disconnect the fear from your professional relationships and decision making. I encourage you to gently and lovingly acknowledge what fears may have been driving you pretenure:

- Fear of failure
- Fear of being exposed as an impostor
- Fear of not pleasing other people who would vote on your tenure case
- Fear of speaking the truth to power
- Fear of being punished (denied tenure) for being your true self

It's time to let those fears go. You have tenure, you cannot be fired and you have no reason to fear anything or anyone. While it's not easy to release yourself from fear, it is one of the most important mind-set shifts you can make as a newly tenured faculty member, and it is a requirement for making bold moves in this new chapter of your professional life.

Shift No. 2: Moving from subordinate to equal status with your colleagues. As a tenure-track faculty member, you had to learn how to navigate the political landscape in your department. This was vital because your relationships with your colleagues occur within the invisible (but palpable) context of power. In other words, your senior colleagues had the power to vote on your tenure and promotion, and that may have shaped how you interacted with them, how you engaged in conflict with them, and the weight you gave their opinions in your internal decision making. Being intentional and considerate of power dynamics was a perfectly functional mind-set for your pretenure years, but too many faculty members never shift out of that subordinate mentality when they get tenure and continue making decisions and operating from the standpoint of needing to please their colleagues and not ruffle feathers and feeling compelled to do what others want them to do.

I encourage you this week to get present to how you navigated the power dynamics in your interpersonal relationships with your colleagues while you were on the tenure track. Be honest with yourself in assessing how much of your decision making was influenced by the filter of whether or not something would help you win tenure. Then allow yourself to throw that filter away. It's over, you've won and you no longer need to please everyone. Then ask yourself what it would take to shift into the mind-set that you are your colleague's equal, that healthy conflict strengthens relationships, and that succeeding in your chosen posttenure pathway is the most significant way you can contribute to the greater good on your campus.

And let's be honest, this will be most challenging if you had difficulty along your posttenure pathway, if you had some problematic relationships or if some people hurt you, obstructed you or created obstacles for you. If so, it may be time for you to consider how these relationships will shift moving forward. This may require you to engage in a forgiveness practice, have some clearing conversations, reset some boundaries, learn how to have healthy conflict, get some therapy or do whatever healing work is necessary so that you are able to stand in your power in a healthy and productive way.

Shift No. 3: Moving from fulfilling external criteria for success to creating your own. In the pretenure stage, you needed the support of many people in order to fulfill your campus's standards for tenure. For example, you needed mentors to support your transition into the culture, norms and political landscape of your new campus. You needed sponsors to use their power on your behalf to shape perceptions about you. Because you were shifting into a new identity (from graduate student to independent researcher) you needed the support of your campus infrastructure and start-up funds to get yourself established as a scholar in your own right. Thankfully, most campuses have multiple mechanisms in place to support pretenure faculty members in meeting externally imposed standards for tenure and promotion.

Now you are tenured, you are established in your field and you've got a reputation and relationships on your campus. It's time for you to stand in that hard-won position by taking 100 percent responsibility for what happens to your career moving forward. From this point on, it's no longer about getting support to fulfill your campus's expectations for success. It's now on you to create the vision for what success looks like, set your own agenda, choose your path and get into action to move forward on that path. Nobody is going to guide you, choose for you or hold your hand as you walk down your chosen pathway. It is up to you to ask for what you need, learn new skills, initiate new mentoring relationships and find opportunities that will help you meet your goals.

This mind-set shift is critically important, because you will need to enroll others in your vision of your posttenure pathway. By that I mean your colleagues may have things they want you to do, responsibilities they want you to assume and service they want you to provide that may not be aligned with the path you've chosen. When that occurs, you will need to stand firmly in your vision and have enrollment conversations. In other words, you will need to effectively communicate your pathway in ways that move and inspire others to support you. This is not easy work, and these are not easy conversations, but you must learn how to communicate your vision in a way that articulates a win for everyone.

The Weekly Challenge

This week, I challenge you to:

- reflect on the mind-sets that supported your quest to win tenure;
- identify which of those mind-sets will continue to support you in your new role and which are no longer functional;
- consider the three mind-set shifts described above and ask yourself if you're ready to transition how you think about who you are in relation to your campus;
- experiment with the new mind-sets by walking through your typical day fearless, equal and knowing you have the power to create your own definition of success; and
- if you are reactive to any of this, gently ask yourself: Why?

As we move into building new mentoring networks and planning for success, you'll need to have the confidence to know you *can* do what you want to do, the humility to realize what you don't know and the energy to seek out what you need and ask for it. That is most likely to occur when you let go of fear, embrace your power and have a clear vision of your future that you can articulate to others.

Peace and possibilities,

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, Ph.D.

Founder, [National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity](#)

Questions, Comments, or Concerns?

Contact Us



Legal | Email: Help@FacultyDiversity.org

Phone: 313.347.8485

