I Won't Take Your Bucket... If You Promise Not to Smash My Sandcastle!

By Linnea Minnema and Jennifer Webster

How many times has this scenario played out across the country: A departmental administrator hangs up the phone in frustration after a conversation with the central office. Sighing heavily, she says to herself, "I am so irritated by that central office—why are they always second-guessing my judgment? I have worked on this proposal for three solid weeks with Dr. Superstar, and now they want us to change everything. This always happens when we have to work with them." On the other end of the conversation, the central office administrator is equally perplexed and exasperated by the situation. "Why do the departmental administrators always push decisions off on me?" he wonders aloud to the coffee pot. "They constantly put controversial things in their proposals and then their attitude seems to be, 'I'll let central make this decision' or 'I'll put this in here and if central doesn't like it, they can deal with it.'" Both individuals have good reason to be frustrated, but they also share the responsibility of finding a solution to this ongoing problem.

Let's pause for a moment, and think back to our childhood trips to the beach, with our annoying younger sister, bossy older brother, and three rambunctious cousins—and about a million other kids on summer vacation, all hopped up on ice cream and giddy from sun exposure. There's only one beach, and everyone who wants to play there must learn to share it. Without rules, there would be chaos, tears, broken toys, and everybody would be mad. Except for the work part, research administration is a lot like that beach, and in the spirit of fewer tears, here are four general rules for how we can play nicely in the sand together.

Rule #1
The best sandcastles are built at low tide.

To translate this for research administrators, a little planning ahead eliminates much of the frustration and anger that can surface when people are pressed for time. "The Five Ps," a maxim espoused by CEOs everywhere, applies here: *Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance*. Getting the entire team on the same page and working together before the deadline will help smooth out a potentially rocky road and will ensure the best result for everyone involved. For example, The University of Tennessee has put significant emphasis on encouraging and supporting faculty applications for NSF CAREER awards. Because all proposals are submitted through the central Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP), this has resulted in massive chaos when the proposal due dates arrived. In order to better accommodate this large deadline and plan ahead, OSP has started working more closely with the campus units which have historically been the most active with CAREER proposals. This coordination allowed for the pre-assigning of proposals to central office administrators more than three weeks before they were due to arrive in OSP. This was done behind the scenes and did not require the PIs to alter any of their normal processes. The CAREER deadline week passed with very little fanfare, minimal stress, and over 20 proposals submitted by a team of three. By planning ahead while the proposal "tide" was low, OSP was able to "build a great sandcastle"–a streamlined system for handling a short-term proposal burst.

Rule #2
Don't take other people's buckets.

Time to face reality—you won't always (or often!) be able to get everyone working together in advance. While you are racing to catch up, keep in mind that in research administration, every project is a team effort. That collaborative mindset is crucial, not only to the success of the current project, but also to setting the tone for future interactions among the people involved. When all the problems have been resolved, the proposal gets funded, and your PI is pleased as punch, make sure the credit "bucket" stays with those who actually did the work and share that bucket with everyone who helped. Show your appreciation for the departmental administrator who ran all over campus on the deadline day get-ting crucial letters signed, or acknowledge the central office administrator who stayed late to make sure your late proposal was submitted before the deadline. Send a thank-you email to the person you worked with, and be sure to copy their boss. By sharing those positive feelings in the good times, you'll make a friend for life, and it will be easier to put up with each other during the bad times.

Rule #3
Kicking sand is never appropriate.

Speaking of those "bad times," we all have them, and they are never easy to deal with. No one likes to take the blame for a mistake, and it is natural to want to save face in front of your coworkers—or your boss! However, as the old saying goes, "when you throw mud, you lose ground." By laying all of the blame on the central office for delaying the implementation of the most recent award modification because of "red tape," you neglect to admit that you should have sent the required compliance documents to them in advance of the modification. Your PI knew that it was coming, and even though you were swamped with other end-of-year tasks, a little prior planning on your part would have allowed the modification to move through the channels faster. Beyond earning a reputation as a mean sand-kicking jerk that no one likes to work with, when you cast the blame entirely on the other party, you predispose your PI to be reluctant to work with them in the future. This can become a problem for you later, when you need to work with that person again, and the PI gets frustrated just hearing that name mentioned. By sharing the blame when something doesn't go quite right, the tension of a bad situation can be diluted and ultimately neutralized more quickly.

Rule #4
No smashing other people's sandcastles.

Different units across campus often have different rules, shaped by unique pressures and concerns. The standard operating procedures in your unit aren't always better, just different. You may not understand another unit's rules, but they are in place for a reason, and undermining or ignoring them—"smashing their sandcastle"—won't help your working relationship with that unit. Even if you don't like their rules, or don't think them necessary or useful, respect their dif-ferences and operate within their system when you work together. When the department you're working with doesn't want to use the tuition rates recommended by the central office, it's not the end of the world. When the central office doesn't understand why the business manager won't sign something you're waiting for, without the department head's approval, realize that this will protect both of you in the long run. When different policies clash, by all means document your attempts to address the issue and how it was resolved (or not resolved); however, challenging a long-standing procedure right before a deadline isn't productive and adds stress to an already stressful situation. Be a team player, communicate with each other, be patient, and cultivate a respectful relationship with your colleagues across campus. And who knows? If their sandcastle gets knocked down by a giant wave one day, they might want to ask those they trust to help them rebuild—bigger, better, and stronger than before.

As we daydream about vacations by the seaside while trying to keep our minds on our work, just remember to play by the rules: The best sandcastles are built at low tide (a little bit of planning goes a long way); no taking other people's buckets (give credit where credit is due); kicking sand is never appropriate (don't pass the blame for a mistake); and no smashing other people's sandcastles (respect each other's rules). If you keep these rules in mind, your research administration job will feel just like a day at the beach, only better with all the children playing nicely together in the sand. N

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