

## **I Am Struggling – Can You Help Me?**

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In my job, I take great pride in my ability to connect with the students with whom I work. In fact, over the past year, I felt as though I had done a much better job at this. Having experienced the loss of my grandfather on December 11, 2007 and the dissolution of my marriage last summer, I took the risk of being highly vulnerable with my students, especially the men with whom I worked. To me, this not only symbolized my ability to live authentically, but also a way to help these young men realize that it is okay to struggle with life's challenges. Over the year I had many conversations with the Interfraternity Council Executive Board I advised about what was going on in their lives, what was going on in my life, and how we as men dealt with conflict, struggled with failure, and coped with difficult situations.

As a group and as individuals, I was starting to see this group of five men become more cohesive and make meaning of their experiences in ways I had only hoped possible. The compassion and vulnerability these men showed was remarkable, and something that was very special indeed. It was certainly not all rainbows and sunshine with the IFC Executive Board, but it was apparent these men were turning a corner in understanding a side of masculinity they had not previously allowed themselves to explore, namely the vulnerability that goes along with being able to express emotions beyond the anger and lust we were socialized to be comfortable sharing.

As the spring semester rolled to a close, I found myself in a similar position to many around the country: it was time for my annual performance evaluation. Having confidence that, while I was by no means perfect at my job, I was doing above average, I went into my meeting with my supervisor with mild optimism. My outlook on performance evaluations is they are always a great chance for me to find out where my gaps are as a professional so that I can work to rectify these in the upcoming year.

Typically, these evaluations end up being rather affirming, as I know the areas in which I struggle, and can have some constructive conversations with my supervisor about ways in which I can improve in trouble areas. However, this particular meeting would throw me a curveball.

When meeting with my supervisor, I read the following statement on my performance evaluation:

Colleagues suggest that you think more about how you are communicating with students and the language that you use. Sometimes you can be too professional and not connect with students on their level.

When I read this, I was not incensed or angry. More to the point, I was hurt and curious who would say such a thing. 'Surely this person has no idea what I truly have done with these men this year' I thought. 'This cannot be true in the least.' However, the more I turned the words over in my mind, I started to doubt myself and the work I thought I had done. Furthermore, a previous conversation with another White male student affairs educator who heard the same feedback came back to me. Was there a connection to the fact that we were both White men and receiving this feedback? What were we doing to create the perception that we needed to be seen as experts? Were other White male colleagues in the field hearing this feedback, too? Was I just thinking I was being more vulnerable than I truly was being? And if so, why was I hiding behind the shroud of professionalism and a glorified vocabulary?

After my meeting ended, I fired off an email to three trusted colleagues, all White men, asking them first if they had heard the same feedback and secondly what meaning could be made from it. I wanted so desperately to disregard the feedback, but the awareness of my privilege and being able to disregard such feedback due to this snapped me back to reality. I had an obligation, both professional and personal, to make meaning of this feedback and use it to alter my behavior. Furthermore, the work of Baxter Magolda's *Knowing and Reasoning in College* came flooding back to my

mind. Was my use of highfalutin language rooted in a need to depict my mastery in my job? Moreover, if this was the case, who was I silencing and/or unintentionally making to feel less than adequate through my behavior. My privilege as a White man kept acting like a devil on my shoulder telling me to forget it, but I knew better than to let this go now.

What followed from my email was a flurry of conversations with my male colleagues. Out of the four of us, we had all heard this feedback, two of us hearing it very recently. Furthermore, we were all young professionals when we heard the feedback, bolstering my thought about this somehow being linked to our desire to be seen as needing to display mastery in our respective roles. While there were certainly terrific points made by all parties involved in the conversation about the need to not coddle students and challenge them to live up to the educational mission and values implicit in membership in institutions of higher education, I was uncomfortable having that be the end of the conversation. While I truly believe we need to heighten, rather than lower, our expectations of students (as well as ourselves and our professional peers), I also understand the need to speak and work in ways students can comprehend and appreciate.

In my next one-on-one with my supervisor, I decided to share with her my lingering discomfort with the performance evaluation comment. I shared with her I was not yet ready to fully discuss it with clarity, but that I was connecting with other colleagues who had heard the same feedback. I also told her my feelings about the feedback being tied to my identity as a White man, which she found interesting. She asked that I follow up with her when I felt ready to do so, and told me she would be curious to hear more about the conversations I was having with my male counterparts across the country. She then confirmed I had done some great work with the IFC Executive Board during the past year, and that perhaps the feedback was given by someone who may not be as intimately familiar with this as we both were. Perhaps the feedback was related to interstaff relations rather than the work I was doing directly with students. Even still, I told her it was something I was curious

exploring more to ensure I was being as productive and effective an educator as possible.

It has been about three months since my initial performance evaluation meeting, and while I do not have complete clarity, I have been able to come to some resolutions about the feedback I was given. First off, in talking with my IFC President, I have learned this may indeed be feedback given more in terms of working with other professional peers than with students. While I do think I can incorporate this feedback in the work I do with some fraternity men (ie, new members and chapter leadership, most notably some presidents), I have been told I have done well at concurrently being down to earth, challenging the process, and encouraging vulnerability. Additionally, I was given feedback by my IFC President that it has been meaningful for he and the rest of the IFC Executive Board to see me share my whole person with them as the year has unfolded.

Secondly, I have come to the conclusion that I am uncomfortable with still being in an entry-level professional position, especially as this relates to my male gender role socialization of needing to be successful (as if where I am currently is not a sign of success). Despite this being unconscious, it manifests itself in visible ways, most notably my apparent need to use certain words, phrases, and a professional vernacular that others may perceive as haughty. There are certainly ways I can express complex thoughts in a more accessible way, and this is a challenge I need to take seriously if I want to further develop as an educator.

In addition, one of my colleagues who was a part of the original conversation regarding language has recently challenged me to think more deeply about why it was I believed myself to be doing an above average job in the first place. Perhaps this is linked to the fact that, as he stated so poignantly, “maybe the people who wrote the rules about what is above average look like you and I, so we are more confident playing the game” (R. Barone, personal communication). It is a terrific point which warrants much more thought, but it is clear that, as a White man, I go into such meetings with the assumption that I am doing a good job. This is clearly bolstered by the fact that other White

men wrote the rules on how to be successful in the workplace, so how could I not know how to succeed? In addition, how do I work to deconstruct these rules and build a set that works for all, regardless of privilege? How do I engage students in this work? These are all questions worth considering, as the impact extends far broader than just my personal situation.

The third lesson I learned from this all was the strong need for me to find and stay connected to professional colleagues around the country. I rarely experience conversations like those I had with my three White male counterparts due to this experience, and oftentimes, these only happen when I attend professional conferences. However, in an attempt to feed my soul as well as develop as a more complete educator, I was reminded of the importance of sharing and connecting with others around the country. Not only are others struggling with some of the same things we are, but as a man, I find it continually important to sometimes take a moment and say, quite simply, “I am struggling – can you help me out?”