1. Don’t be intimidated!

Faculty members are skilled academic and professional experts. You are also a professional! Although your roles are different, both are of value to the University. Don’t let concerns or assumptions about status prevent you from engaging with faculty when it’s relevant to both your jobs.

“I’ve been at Cal for ~15 years, but following operational excellence-based changes I’m not always aware of what staff roles are related to my needs. Without the personal interactions, I often forget who it is that I’m even supposed to reach out to in order to get my questions answered. Laying the groundwork with an initial meeting helps make interactions less nebulous and is an important step to building trust.

-Britt Glaunsinger (Professor of Molecular & Cell Biology / Plant & Microbial Biology)

2. Communicate openly and often

Try to connect in some way beyond email, either via a phone call, Zoom, or in-person meeting to introduce yourselves and establish needs and expectations on both sides. Building an effective relationship of course goes both ways: you learn what working and communication style is most effective for the faculty member, and they learn the same about you.

3. Get to know each other

Make time for informal chats to learn about shared interests, subscribe to a listserv like Teach-Net, or reach out to a faculty member for an informational interview. If you’re working on a project that links up with their goals and needs their involvement, they’ll probably appreciate hearing from you.

“Hierarchy is definitely a real thing and that is the construct we work in, but staff members have a range of experiences that are distinct and valuable to faculty. Know that more often than not, your expertise matters to them. We can galvanize around the fact that we have a shared mission, and that partnership can be very rewarding.

-Gia White (Administrative Director, Global International and Area Studies)

4. Understand faculty service

If your department doesn’t already circulate a list of faculty service roles and committee assignments, ask if they’d be willing to do so to help you understand who has responsibility in which areas. Their service may intersect with some of your tasks, and you’ll gain some appreciation for the different roles faculty occupy across campus.

“For someone like myself who does communications work and interacts with a wide range of stakeholders, it's useful to become familiar with the research interests of faculty in your department. This will allow you to make connections between faculty and students, and to better answer questions from visitors. You also just might find that you're interested in the research and want to learn more.

-Ben Dillon (Director of Marketing and Communications, Theatre, Dance & Performance Studies)

5. Establish a schedule

Although one may think that flexible faculty hours result in working 24/7, it’s important to acknowledge and respect competing demands on their time—as they should for you. When collaborating, set a calendar together to avoid things getting sidelined.
6. Facilitate collaboration

Campus is a big place, yet faculty sometimes have limited knowledge of the many programs, organizations, and initiatives beyond their departmental bubbles. Use your knowledge and perspective to make connections that can be mutually beneficial.

“Find common ground in what you want to achieve, make sure faculty members know that you want to make their ideas work and address their needs, and then make sure that you’re clear and honest about organizational limitations. Faculty will come to know you as someone who is helpful but doesn’t steer them wrong, and your reputation for competence will be a major asset to you in your career.”

–Catherine Cronquist Browning (Assistant Dean, Academic Programs, Equity & Inclusion, School of Information)

7. Practice your translation skills

Help faculty navigate organizational complexity by translating administrative terms and acronyms into no-nonsense language for experts in another field. The same is true in the other direction: by translating faculty paperwork and requests into clear and accurate business language, staff can help avoid bureaucratic snags and delays.

8. Simplify

To the extent possible, dial down the bureaucracy and keep your communications to faculty focused on three things: what you need from them, what they need to know, and what they can expect. If you can connect your requests to their duties of teaching, research, and service, it will help them understand why you need their attention.

9. Don’t overpromise

Sometimes staff are reluctant to tell a faculty member “no” or to explain why a request isn’t feasible. However, saying no early—or briefly explaining the issue—will help keep things running more smoothly in the long run.

“Let’s be honest: sometimes faculty live up to their infamous reputation for uttering wacky or impractical things. At these times, I remind myself that their experience and perspective is very different from mine, and I pause to translate what they’re saying so that I can respond in a productive way.”

–Moriah Van Vleet (Department Manager, Celtic Studies, Italian Studies, Scandinavian, Slavic)

10. Foster a climate of mutual respect

Be positive and measured, and stay open and reflective and open in your interactions with everyone. When conflicts and misunderstandings arise, work with your department chair and/or manager to resolve them: they may address the issue directly, or provide insight into the faculty member’s personality, responsibilities, or stressors that can help resolve (or illuminate) the situation. Visit the Staff Ombuds Office to explore more options for effective conflict resolution.

Compiled by Julia Nelsen (Program Manager, Institute of European Studies), with thanks to the contributors quoted above and to NOW Conference panelists Jocelyn Surla Banaria (Executive Director, Academic Senate), Eric Falci (Professor of English / Associate Dean, Graduate Division), Christian Gordon (Assistant Dean of Development, Social Sciences), and Andrea Lambert (Chief of Staff to the Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost).