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The Four Agreements in Academia

March 9, 2020 *Emily Faulconer, PhD*



While I have read the book *The Four Agreements* five times, I had not perused this book since I accepted a professorship in 2012. When revisiting this book, it was apparent to me that the practical advice for personal freedom translated well to academia. Once I came upon this connection, I explored further and found that Bonni Stachowiak also drew this parallel in her blog, *Teaching In Higher Ed*. Here, I will share a few ways to implement the Four Agreements in your academic career.

1. Be Impeccable With Your Word

Ruiz argues that this first agreement – to be impeccable with your word – is the most important and also the most challenging to honor. He states, “The word is the most powerful tool you have as a human; it is a tool of magic. But like a sword with two edges, your word can create the most beautiful dream, or your word can destroy everything around you.” (Ruiz, 1997)p. 26) Ruiz compares words to seeds that are planted in human minds.

Mind your self-talk. Your mind is a fertile ground for your own words! Negative self-talk can contribute to Imposter Syndrome. Academia often pushes faculty for constant growth and high performance in multiple areas: teaching, research, and service. Academia is competitive, not just in landing a professorship, but securing research funding and fellowships. All of these contribute to an atmosphere that can breed self-doubt. If you find yourself stuck in negative self-talk and feeling “unworthy,” separate your feelings from facts. What are your recent successes? What are your strengths? You do not need to be perfect. Mistakes happen; embrace them as part of the process.

Examine your vocabulary. Common phrases may have connotations or roots that you were not aware of, which may be hurtful or upsetting to students or colleagues. One way to be inclusive is to learn someone’s pronouns or use gender-neutral pronouns when unsure (e.g. them/they). You can share your own pronouns in places like your email signature line to help others feel comfortable sharing theirs without forcing them to. Another way to be respectful is to replace insensitive language (sexist, ageist, or referring to a racial, ethnic, or religious group) in your vocabulary. While in some circumstances, certain terms are accepted, there are many times when the use of a word or term can be hurtful.

2. Don’t Take Anything Personally

Accept that rejection is normal in academia. Whether it is your conference session, research manuscript, or funding proposal, chances are you will get an email that starts with, “We regret to inform you ...” a few times a year. Give yourself a defined amount of time to be upset, but do not take this rejection personally. Even if feedback on a failure feels (or is) harsh, it is very likely that it contains useful information. Get back to work on something else, then come back to the failure and decide your next steps. What are your options? Who can you go to for support? What can you learn from the failure? Can the experience still lead to the desired result?

Depersonalize plagiarism and cheating. When a student violates academic integrity standards, it can be disheartening and often feels personal. Chances are, you were *not* on the student’s mind when they cheated. Three conditions increase the likelihood of cheating: 1) pressure to achieve, 2) community ethos of unethical collaboration, and 3) unreflective digital collaboration (e.g. trivialization of digital plagiarism) (Walsh, 2016). Consider what ways you could support

academic integrity in your classroom, such as more frequent assessments with feedback, including early success opportunities like lower-stakes drafts, unique and engaged learning experiences (e.g. service-learning), and vertical support for ethical collaborations.

3. Don't Make Assumptions

Recognize that everyone is fighting a hard battle. Your students and colleagues have challenges in their personal and professional lives that you may not know anything about. A student who often shows up late may have difficulty with childcare. A colleague that takes a long time to respond to emails may be a primary caregiver for a family member. Practice empathy and active listening to help you avoid making unfounded assumptions.

Maintain a growth mindset. If we have a fixed mindset about ourselves or our students, we are making assumptions about knowledge and skills that may be erroneous. What preconceived notions do you have about your students? A 2019 article demonstrated that faculty who believe student ability is fixed showed larger racial achievement gaps and lower student motivation in their courses (Canning, Muenks, Green, & Murphy, 2019). No matter how far along the academic path you are, it is important to never stop learning. Self-reflection on your strengths, weaknesses, failures, and goals is a key action for maintaining a growth mindset.

4. Always Do Your Best

Just say no. In academia, faculty members can be asked to do a lot, from committee service to office hours to peer reviews. It is okay to say no to opportunities that will negatively impact your ability to do your best on key responsibilities for your position. Protect your time; only say yes to activities that you can do your best on. Learning how to say no can improve the quality of your work, help you avoid burnout, and ensure that your actions are clearly aligned with your goals.

Take time for yourself. Both junior and senior faculty tend to work long hours and often use weekend and holiday time to work on professional tasks like email, class preparation, and manuscript preparation (Ziker, 2014). With this in mind, it is understandable why professors have an increased risk of stress-related illness (Kirk & Rhodes, 2010). Our best will inevitably be diminished if we neglect other aspects of ourselves. The number of hours you work does not

define you as a person or your success as an academic. So, take time to do what feeds your soul and brings happiness to your world so that you are healthy enough – both physically and mentally – to tackle your faculty responsibilities.

It is my hope that this practical advice for personal freedom within your career in academia supports your success and happiness.

Bio: Dr. Emily Faulconer is an assistant professor and faculty research associate for the College of Arts and Sciences – Worldwide Campus, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. She earned a PhD in Environmental Engineering Sciences from the University of Florida in 2012. Her research interests are within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, primarily in undergraduate research and online education. She is also actively involved in national level service through the National Science Teaching Association (NSTA) as an online advisor and as an advisory board member for their *Journal of College Science Teaching*.

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