Notes from The College Administrator’s Survival Guide  

General principles:
- Whenever possible, tie the analysis of a situation, feedback to colleagues or policy development to a clear statement of the expectations that are derived from the mission and values of the university. Avoid references to personalities or other distractions. Base decisions on facts and institutional principles.

- It is misguided to act on a single version of a story when there were multiple participants in the drama. After sufficient facts have been gathered, proceed deliberately while keeping long-term goals in mind.

- Consistently model cordial courtesy for colleagues. Ask people to rephrase any statements that frame the discussion primarily as personality issues rather than as specific problems or policy considerations.

- Everyone in the university must spend resources wisely so that institutional funds are used to reach its goals. All criminal matters, such as stealing, must be referred to the police.

Highly regulated areas such as research compliance, hiring, firing, or discrimination:
- Get advice from General Counsel for any legal matter and then follow that advice. It’s a legal matter when a legal document has been received, a lawyer has contacted you or the issue under discussion has legal consequences. Research misconduct is especially tricky and requires expert consultation.

- Do not try to handle legal matters on your own. Do not assure an informant that reported information can be kept confidential. There may be applicable legal policies and standards that apply to his/her case.

- Higher education serves the common good and academic freedom provides support for scholarly pursuit. Neither academic freedom nor collegiality means that all conduct must be tolerated. The principles of academic freedom include: accuracy, appropriate restraint and respect for others.

- When difficult situations arise a) gather information directly b) get policy and legal support from experts as necessary c) adhere strictly to established procedures and d) retain strong personal boundaries.

- Once you are put on notice about a potential legal issue, get advice from HR, General Counsel or other resources. Be very careful about the right of due process. Before any action is taken, there must be information given to the individual and the opportunity to respond to the charge.

- Faculty should know that if an expression of concern about a potentially explosive issue is received, he/she should immediately inform the department chair unless the concern is obviously frivolous.

Negotiations:
- When asked to intervene in a situation, or to provide resources or when it’s necessary to ask other for favors, negotiation skills will be needed. Recognize when the conversation has become a negotiation rather than a simple interaction. Most negotiations require preparation and an attitude of joint problem solving. Postpone the decision until both of these can be achieved. Look to provide value and respect for both parties in the discussion even when the request must be denied.

- It is helpful and educational to exhibit a genuine curiosity about the other person’s point of view by asking questions. For example: What are your concerns, How will this help, Can you help me understand your perspective, How can we achieve your goal?

- Make an effort to slow down and to listen carefully rather than interrupting, anticipating or leaping to conclusions. Repeat the other person’s concerns to be sure they’re understood.
Establish consistent expectation for appropriate professional conduct. An administrator should act as if he/she is comfortable being an authority figure but without becoming authoritarian.

Try to stay optimistic and look for a silver lining when confronted with thorny problems. Focus on principles and goals rather than adapting to personalities. Preserve possibilities and come back to the issue for further work as necessary. Be patient and confident that most problems are solvable.

Complaints:
- Don’t take complaints personally. Being defensive won’t help. In your replies, aim for understatement not inflammatory rhetoric. Shorter is better in a written reply; when in doubt leave it out. Say what you’ll do and then do what you said you’d do to fix the problem within a reasonable time frame.
- Most people aren’t evil. Never attribute to malice what laziness, ignorance or incompetence can explain. When you need to address concerns about someone’s performance, be direct, specific and ask for his/her help in solving the problem.
- Some serious problems require formal process and you may need to tell participants in a situation to avoid interacting with each other. Keep notes and document every encounter. Your written records should be calm, fair and rational. Trust your instincts if you feel fearful and take a witness with you as necessary.
- People can make serious errors but continue as productive citizens within the organization. To recover from a wrong, the miscreant needs to take responsibility and offer remorse, reform his/her behavior and recompense the victim. Without all four steps, forgiveness will be unlikely.

Personnel:
- Remember that some people intentionally bully others or violate codes of civilized behavior by acting as intimidators others get their way by being aggrieved victims. Beware of being manipulated.
- Everyone must follow the rules or trust in the system and morale will suffer. Someone who is exhibiting threatening behavior or violating important principles must be dealt with even though this will be painful.
- Reinforce the norm of positive and collegial interactions. Congratulate everyone when they support the goal of constructive civility. Always focus on issues or principles and not on personalities or status.
- The formality in process should scale with the severity of the allegations or consequences of the issue. Conducting a formal review can turn out to be in the best interest of an innocent person who has been wrongfully accused.
- In any formal process, it’s important to have a written agenda, ground rules, a time limit, careful introduction of the participants with a description of their roles, and no tolerance for personal attacks.
- Administrators must remain neutral and remind their colleagues that everyone should be committed to a fair, just outcome. The obligation is to determine the facts and uphold the principles of the University.
- In evaluation of others, balance and clarity are important. There should be no surprises if a clear pattern of warnings has been developed previously. Praise people for things they are doing well; even accomplished adults need encouragement. Develop a thick skin and offer a gracious response that conveys empathy whenever possible. If a meeting becomes impossible, arrange for a break or knock over your coffee.