



Clearing Trees and Planting Seeds

Chair: Shaking his head in frustration, tells the Dean, “He’ll never do it.”

Dean: Have you tried asking him?”

Chair: “No. He’s a jerk. Look, Mort hasn’t taught a new preparation in ten years. I think the last time he published was when Ronald Reagan was Governor of California. You ask him to be on a departmental committee and you can bet that if he shows up for meetings at all he’ll be unprepared. It’s been like this for years. Everyone in the department just wants him to go away. It’s not that he’s an unpleasant or mean-spirited person, it’s that he doesn’t pull his weight. On anything. Ever. It’s terrible for morale”

Dean: “Okay, so I’m new to the college. And looking at his evaluations from past years, I see that you and your colleagues consistently rate him “good” or “above average” on service. Why’s that? If he’s a negative force, shouldn’t he be getting “sub-standard” on his ratings?”

Chair: “What, and then have to deal with a protracted and energy draining appeal. No, we don’t want to give him that much of our attention.”

Dean: “Well, let’s come back to that later. Why don’t you start by telling me what previous Chairs and deans have tried.”

Chair: “I think everything’s been tried. My predecessor gave him the teaching assignments he requested, put him on the easiest committees, excused him from department meetings, anything to avoid a confrontation. So what happened? The nutcase comes to think that these things are his rights. ‘Let the new faculty teach on Saturdays, or early in the morning, or at night. I’ve earned the right to the better time slots because of my seniority,’ is what he tells me now.”

Dean: “And you acquiesce?”

Chair: “Well, what can I do? Again, he’d just make a big scene and drag the department back to the campus appeals committee like he has every other time something doesn’t go his way.”

Dean: “And he’d lose if your department had a policy of random time assignments or a policy of regularly rotating class schedule assignments. Or, if you simply asserted your prerogative as Chair to make up the schedule, I’d back you up in that one hundred percent.”

Chair: “Well, that might be true, but I think he’d allege that I was retaliating against him for some past time when he appealed something and won his case. Beside, the other faculty members don’t want the rancor that yet another confrontation – call it ‘conflagration’ – will produce.”

Dean: “I see. You’re telling me that harmony is the most important consideration. But it seems to me that your policy is something like peace at any price. What about fairness, or service to students?”

Chair: “You can’t mean that I should assign this guy to large enrollment Freshman classes? He’d mess up those students for the rest of their educational lives! He’s that much of a loser, and spiteful too”

Dean: “I thought you said he wasn’t mean-spirited.”

Chair: “Right, not if he’s getting his way. But otherwise.”

Dean: “That’s something we’re going to have to take a stand about. We cannot tolerate educational sabotage. Tenure does not protect a person from negligence.”



Chair: “How are we supposed to do anything about that?”

Dean: “You do have a system of teaching evaluations in place, don’t you? I’m not talking about those silly numerical evaluation forms either, I’m talking about regular peer visitations, narrative evaluations, reviews of syllabi and assignments and tests. You know, some process to evaluate teaching that actually has some validity and reliability. And what about student learning outcomes assessment? Do you have any data that shows how much his students are learning in his courses?”

Chair: “That would be nice if we had a merit salary system, but we’ve been looking at cost of living and across the board raises for years.”

Dean: “You don’t need a merit salary system to exercise your group responsibility as professionals to insure the quality of your own departmental curriculum. And even without a merit salary system, there still are plenty of other goodies you, as Chair, can control. How about your allocation of student assistants, travel money, first choice of teaching assignments, summer stipends, course releases, lab space, office assignments, replacement computer upgrades, or whatever else you do have that you can use as a positive incentive for good teaching?”

Chair: “Departments at this university don’t have much control over those kinds of things.”

Dean: “Well then, we’ll put these kinds of incentives into play at the college level, I’m going to draft a proposal for the Chairs Council to review that will reward as many of our college’s effective teachers as possible with the kinds of things I just listed. What if, for example, the effective teachers were able to have 100% of their travel to professional conferences covered, but the poor teachers, even if they were publishing up a storm, could only get 50% covered?”

Chair: “I don’t know about that. Our department voted long ago to divide everything equally across the board.”

Dean: “It’s time to reconsider that ridiculous invitation to mutual mediocrity. And certainly it was never anyone’s intention in voting for such a thing that incompetent and negligent colleagues would get an equal share with all the other hard working and productive folks. Going back to the question of a college policy, we can work the bugs out later, but you get the idea. We have to use positive incentives, and, when necessary disciplinary sanctions. That’s what those things are for. And the first thing we have to fix with guys like your deadwood colleague is their teaching. Then we have to get the idea through to them that they are not going to be excused from service responsibilities either. If we can’t use the merit pay system for this, we’re going to use the full range of other incentives and perks that we have. We can’t be egalitarian about everything when some folks are contributing fully and others are intentionally doing less than their fair share.”

Chair: “I don’t know, you don’t have to live with this guy on a day to day basis.”

Dean: “And neither should our students. We cannot be the ones who enable his intentional incompetence. A department that does that is not a healthy community. It will eventually drag everyone down. We have to take a professional stance on this. **Structure** situations so that he can be successful, **support** his positive efforts, focus our attention and energy on **here and now**. If his behavior improves, we reward that. If it does not, we pursue the appropriate disciplinary sanctions in a professional way. This is not about trying to make people love us. This is about being sure that the college and all its faculty members offer our students the best education we can. To do this we need everyone on the faculty payroll to be earning their salary. Does this make sense?”

Chair: “It’s not going to be pretty. I’m going to need some help from your office.”



Questions:

- 1. What do you think about the Dean’s ideas about using positive incentives first?**
- 2. Could the Associate Dean have any special role or assignment in working with this department, and if so what exactly should it be?**
- 3. How much should the Dean share with the Associate Dean in regards to the Dean’s true views about this department, its problems, perspectives, and personnel?**
- 4. How much should the Dean share with the Provost / Academic VP in regards to the Dean’s true views about this department, its problems, perspectives, and personnel?**
- 5. Is the “professional” model or the “family” model more fruitful for understanding academic departments and how they do/should function?**
- 6. What about the egalitarianism and co-dependent behavior of the department, how does that affect group success?**
- 7. The mantra “*structure, support, here, and now*” was used by the Dean. Why? How is that different than going back into history to dig up old grievances and personal conflicts? Whose mental health does that mantra most support?**