

## The Power Diving Probationer<sup>1</sup>

The job interview candidate John Power Diver had with the dean as positive and promising as the first impressions he had made on the Chronology Department. When the first two choices of the department dropped out of the late-started search, the Chair recommend John, the department's third choice, for an assistant professorship starting in the fall. Only two of fifteen senior faculty voice misgivings about John's potential as a teacher. After all, the students here at Calcified U were different than those at Far Left U, where John had been a successful lecturer. But the majority, including the Chair and the Dean, felt that John's enthusiasm for teaching would prevail. So, John was offered and accepted the position.

In July, two months before his contract was to begin, John contacted the department Chair, Altera Drummer. Could he be assigned an office and be given a new computer so he could apply for a grant that would give him curriculum development and research time. John hoped to use this time to continue working with his former mentor at Far Left U. Altera asked for clarification. No, said John, if he received the grant he'd not be coming to Calcified U until a full year after his contracted starting date. And, yes, John thought it was just fine to work on changing curriculum even though he'd never taught at Calcified nor studied the approved departmental syllabi. The office and the computer were just to reassure his new department colleagues that he really would be coming to Calcified U, even if a year later than everyone had planned.

Altera responded saying she would assign an office, although John should know that almost everyone was doubled up these days and campus construction plans showed this would be the case for the next three years. Yes, a computer was available, not a new one, but one that more than met the specifications John had indicated in his interview. But, no, the department had a policy that faculty could not apply for grants until after their official contract start dates. And, said the Chair, the sort of grant John was thinking about might not be the best way to begin his new probationary contract. Was it really wise, she asked John, for him to apply for a grant and to go away to design new courses without knowing our programs, our students, and his new colleagues' views about the curriculum? Summer phone and e-mail exchanges between Altera and John quickly deteriorated. John appealed the Chair's decision not to give him a new computer and not to sign off on his intended grant proposal to the dean.

### 1. Should the dean intervene on John's behalf? Why or why not?

More phone calls and e-mail exchanges occurred, this time involving the dean as well as the Chair. Before making a final decision, the dean asked the Chair to meet to discuss John's appeal. As they talked they became aware that each had been slightly misquoted or misrepresented to the other by John in the course of the summer's exchanges. The two agreed that they would always touch base with each other, should it ever happen in the future that John appeared to be going around the Chair to the dean or to other campus administrators. The dean supported the Chair and no grant proposal was submitted.

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<sup>1</sup>All characters, situations, and stories described here are fictional. No reference to actual persons, events, or institutions is intended or assumed. Drs. Peter and Noreen Facione developed and refined these hypothetical cases based on the experiences gained through their many decades of service as faculty, administrators, workshop presenters, and leadership consultants to colleges and universities throughout the nation.

One week into the semester John appealed to the dean to have his office changed. He said his assigned office was dark, cold, and damp. By John's account, a dungeon he was being made to share with a fleet of part time faculty. The dean sent an assistant to investigate. The assistant reported, yes, the office was only marginally acceptable, but, to no one's surprise, the building was overcrowded and several offices on the side of the building where John's was located were identically unpleasant. The report said that John shared his office with one adjunct faculty member, a common arrangement for the majority of tenured and probationary faculty in the Chronology Department. Seeing no injustice in the office assignment, the dean did not intervene, not that a suitable alternative was available anyway. The dean asked the assistant to reassure John that the new construction, already approved and out for architectural design, would solve the office problems, including John's, in the relatively near future.

The dean learned that John's response was to accuse the dean's assistant of bias and collusion with the department Chair. John's protests of mistreatment reached many faculty in his own and other departments. A colleague in Chronology offered to switch offices, if it would make John happy. John refused, saying that the colleague should not be forced into the dungeon either.

In the weeks that followed the dean, who had many friends in the Chronology Department, asked those friends confidentially for their perceptions on John's situation. The first said that it was unfortunate that John seemed to display so much personal animosity toward Chair Altera, whom so many in the department found to be such a wonderful Chair. Another friend speculated to the dean that perhaps some of the tenured faculty were intent on drumming John out of the department. They had not wanted to hire John many years ago since he had not been their first or second choice in the search. And, perhaps subsequently, they had managed to convince themselves – rightly or wrongly -- that he was not producing at a level sufficient for tenure. This friend lamented, however, that John said and did things that systematically alienated even those colleagues who had been his strongest supporters during the search process the previous spring.

## **2. At this point, what, if anything, should the dean do?**

A busy month passed. Although twenty new assistant professors had been hired in the college that fall, none came to the dean's attention except John. John, it seemed, had been describing his difficulties to other faculty around the college and the university. It appeared that the picture John painted of the Chronology Department was consistently negative. According to John it was hopelessly inbred, sexist, seriously out of touch with developments in the field of chronological studies, and controlled by a cabal of inflexible senior faculty and a maniacal Chair. John told of being forbidden to apply for grants, of being denied adequate computer support, of being assigned an unfit office, and of being forced to teach irrelevant theories on the basis of outmoded syllabi. John complained that other assistant professors in the department were terrified to speak their minds at meetings. These others were treated better than John because they had accepted their subservience, whereas John would endure persecution rather than submit to the iron will of Chair Altera. Or, at least that's how John's stories came through when they reached the dean.

As the semester progressed John's relationships with his Chronology Department colleagues were deteriorating rapidly. The dean learned the following: The mentor whom Altera had assigned to John, a tenured professor, Thomas Tremendous, had quit as John's mentor, complaining of stress headaches he experienced trying to deal with John's propensity to interpret day to day conversations as personal attacks and unwillingness to accept well-intended advice. No other tenured member of the department was willing to take on the responsibility of mentoring John. The tenured faculty of Chronology no longer felt comfortable speaking with John individually, because they attributed to John a tendency to misquote, misinterpret, take remarks out of context, and play one person against another. The senior faculty of the

department abandoned their previous resistance to peer classroom visitations and undertook a series of classroom visitations to check on the quality of the teaching of all junior faculty, John included.

John regarded the visits to his classes as poorly conceived, unfair, and excessive. Chair Altera, had consulted with the Faculty Senate President with regard campus policies about not offering a second year contract to a tenure track assistant professor.

**3. Given these developments, what, if anything, should the dean do? Should the dean confront the Chair, check the policies, talk with John, alert the vice-president?**

On the first class day of January the dean receives a voice-mail message from John. “Dear Dean, There is an important professional meeting in February where Chronologists hold job interviews. We must meet as soon as possible. And, whatever you do, don’t tell Altera that I’ve contacted you, because she will take it out on me. No matter what I do, I can’t please her. I want you to know, dean, that none of the senior faculty here like me. They discriminate against me, criticize my work, and don’t tell me how I can improve. I cannot trust them and I’m very unhappy here at Calcified U. So, I’m thinking about circulating my resume and I want to ask you to write me a positive letter of recommendation.”

**4. Should the dean meet with John as requested?**

**5. Should the dean write a positive letter of recommendation?**

**6. Recalling the agreement that the dean made with Altera to alert one another about possible end runs, should the dean tell Altera about this contact from John?**

**7. Should the dean talk with any others in the Chronology Department about John’s situation or about the message John left on the dean’s voice mail?**

On Thursday of that same week, before the dean has had the opportunity to meet with John, the Chronology Department tenured faculty met, as they do annually in January, to evaluate all the probationary faculty of the department. When they came to John’s case, they voted unanimously not to recommend John for a second probationary year. The next day the Chair reported the recommendation to the dean and asserted that the reason for the vote was that John’s presence in the department was viewed as so disruptive that it inhibited a great many other faculty from focusing on their teaching and scholarship. Chair Altera reminded the dean that the university, by contract, could decide not to renew a first year assistant professor provided that notice of non-renewal was given before a date still some weeks away. The Chair further urged that the most humane thing for John would be for the dean to notify him as soon as possible. This, said the Chair, would also greatly reduce the stresses in the department.

**8. Does the reason presented by the department warrant non-renewal?**

**9. Should the dean accept the non-renewal recommendation or not?**

**10. In view of this development, should the dean meet with John as John had requested earlier in the week? If they meet, what should the dean say about John’s prospects of working at Calcified U. next academic year?**

**11. If campus policies do not require that reasons be given for non-renewal, and if the dean decides to accept the recommendation, should the dean share the reasons with John?**