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The Art of Juggling: Improving Your Skills as an Academic Leader

Simin Cwick & Julie Ray
Southeast Missouri State University

Communicating Effectively

- Information overload
- Status differences
- Past history
- Workload
- Cultural diversity
- Cultural changes

Case Study 4.4: The Toxic Tenured Teacher*

A faculty member in your department of fourteen people, Dr. Crotchety, is a tenured full professor who has been at the university for more than thirty years. You have had a somewhat uneven relationship with Dr. Crotchety throughout your term as chair. At times he can display a very pleasant demeanor; when things go his way, he acts as though he is your best friend. But he can become quite vicious when he does not like a decision you have made.

For as long as you remember, Dr. Crotchety has been scheduled to teach his classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. There is no strong pedagogical reason for this arrangement; he merely likes this abbreviated schedule because it allowed him to be on campus only two days a week. This semester, however, you have had to change the course schedule in order to meet the enrollment demand created by the expansion of the university. As a way of fitting Dr. Crotchety's courses into the schedule along with several new courses, you have now had to assign him two classes on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, with one class taught on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

When Dr. Crotchety learns of the schedule change, he emails you a terse message indicating he wants to see you in your office tomorrow morning at 10:00 a.m. to discuss his teaching schedule. You fully anticipate an unpleasant meeting. At precisely 10:00 he storms into your office and begins shouting that you had no right to change the time and days of his courses. Although you try to explain the reasons for your actions, Dr. Crotchety becomes more and more belligerent. His complexion turns bright red, he gestures aggressively, and begins to give you the impression "in your face" a much more literal meaning. You realize that you have to do something immediately to get the situation under control.

Questions

1. What do you do?
2. Would your response be any different if you knew that Dr. Crotchety were:
 - a. Your own mentor when you were a student?
 - b. About to retire in a few months?

Resolution

- I appreciate your frustration.
- I understand your doubt.
- I share your concern.

**All case studies taken from:*

Buller, J.L. & Cipriano, R.E. (2015). A toolkit for department chairs. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Promoting Teamwork and Collegiality

Case Study 3.1: Reappointment Blues*

You are a full professor who has been chairing a department of fifteen full-time faculty members for nine years. One of those fifteen faculty members, Dr. Noxious, is an untenured assistant professor in her third year at the university. Her colleagues have informed you privately that Dr. Noxious is frequently unwilling to collaborate on projects and does not take constructive criticism well. Last semester you witnessed several incidents that caused you serious concern. On two separate occasions, you heard her use language while criticizing students that you regarded as unnecessarily harsh and hurtful.

Another time, when a student challenged a grade that Dr. Noxious had given, she dismissed him abruptly and, in your opinion, rather unprofessionally. Other students observed the latter incident, and about a dozen of them then dropped the course. Her student course evaluations are very inconsistent: some students find her brash style refreshing; others feel demeaned and disrespected by her attitude. In faculty meetings, you have heard how biting her remarks can be when she believes someone has not fully considered a proposal or is wasting her time. The administrative assistant in the department avoids Dr. Noxious whenever possible since she is very condescending to the staff.

In last year's annual evaluation, you recommended that Dr. Noxious be reappointed with reservations. That rating is the second-lowest score you can give to tenure-track faculty members, since the scale runs: (1) Recommend enthusiastically; (2) Recommend; (3) Recommend with reservations; or (4) Do not recommend. In the comments section of the written evaluation, you noted concerns that other members of the program regard Dr. Noxious as a poor colleague and that you have personally witnessed her disrespectful behavior toward students, colleagues, and members of professional staff. You recommended that Dr. Noxious find a mentor who can work with her to help prevent her interpersonal style from causing her professional problems in the future. You have no reason to believe that Dr. Noxious took this advice or that her behavior has improved. Now it is time to write this year's evaluation, and you need to decide which of the four ratings to give her in regard to renewal of her contract.

Questions

1. What do you do?
2. Would your decision be different if any of the following were true?
 - a. If Dr. Noxious were a man instead of a woman.
 - b. If Dr. Noxious were an internationally renowned researcher and your department's leading recipient of grants.
 - c. If Dr. Noxious were a close friend of the Provost.

Reflection

- Use department meetings to discuss shared goals and objectives frequently. Don't let your meetings get bogged down in the minutiae of day-to-day business.
- Make it clear that you see the department as an environment in which all opinions will be heard, considered, and respected.
- Share leadership tasks. Empower others by assigning them both responsibility and authority. Don't try to rule the department by decree.
- Work with others to develop policies on how you would handle conflicts and other challenges *before* they occur.
- Go out of your way to include people in discussions who may be intimidated by other members of the program. Ask them to state their opinions openly and thank them for their candor.
- Try to maintain a healthy balance between the goals of the team as a whole and the goals of each member of the team. Remember that, despite what the organizational chart may say, no faculty member actually "works for" you. They all have private dreams that you can help make a reality if you choose.

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Buller, J.L. & Cipriano, R.E. (2015). A toolkit for department chairs. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Managing Conflict

Case Study 5.1: Buy My New Book – Or Else*

You're the chair of a department of sixteen full-time faculty members. You believe you have excellent and respectful relationships with all of the faculty members in your department. Yesterday Dr. Dolittle, one of your faculty members, came into your office, closed the door, and said, "We have to talk about something right now. It could ruin our department!" With those words, gaining your full attention, Dr. Dolittle went on to report that Dr. Watson, one of your tenured associate professors, had required students in each of the three courses she's teaching this semester to purchase her new, very expensive textbook.

The three courses all are taught at different levels of the discipline: one is a broad survey course, generally taken by first-year students; the second is an introduction to research techniques of the field, a course mostly populated by sophomores; and the third is a capstone preparation course, limited only to seniors. Dr. Dolittle thinks that requiring the same book for three very disparate groups of students is at best pedagogically unsound, at worse a serious breach of ethics and your discipline's professional code. He strongly suggests that, as the department chair, you must speak to Dr. Watson immediately and tell her that her requirement is not acceptable. "Dr. Watson can't use her position as professor to impose a requirement that brings her royalties. If word of what she's doing gets out, it'll be all over campus, maybe even in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*."

You set up a meeting with Dr. Watson to discuss Dr. Dolittle's concerns. About three sentences into your conversation, Dr. Watson becomes belligerent, demanding to know "Which one of my 'distinguished' colleagues thinks it's his place to interfere with my academic freedom? Let me tell you that textbook is the best thing out there for improving student research at each level of our discipline. That's why I wrote it, after all. You know they're just jealous." In the final analysis, Dr. Watson tells you that, since neither the university nor the department has any policy specifically prohibiting professors from assigning their own textbooks to students, she's completely within her rights to do whatever she wants.

Questions

1. What do you do?
2. Would it have made any difference in your decision if, instead of a tenured associate professor, Dr. Watson had been:
 - a. An instructor?
 - b. A full professor with an international reputation for excellence in research?

Reflection

- We will discuss differences of opinion openly, and we will grant everyone an opportunity to be heard.
- Members of the department will be free to express their views on a subject without fear of interruption or retaliation.
- We will make the utmost effort to substantiate our assertions with evidence.
- We will respect one another as professionals. When we disagree, issues and not personalities will be the subjects of our debate.
- We will refrain from using abusive language even when we feel frustrated or annoyed by the actions of others.
- We understand that, as faculty members, we care deeply about many issues. We recognize that, from time to time, the intensity of our discussions may result in tears or emotional outbursts. While those reactions are perfectly valid, we understand that they should not derail the reasoned and considered discussion of substantive issues.
- Issues that affect the entire department will be discussed and decided openly at department meetings and not by any subgroup of the faculty.
- We agree to disagree without being disagreeable.

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