

EMBRACING PARTNERSHIP

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This is a difficult presentation for me. I have considered the appropriateness of speaking now or waiting until the new academic year. My conclusion is to speak while the issues are current, to allow us the summer to contemplate, and then to resume an action agenda in the autumn. I am attempting to share my thoughts honestly and openly with you. I will also be wearing my "corporate executive" hat, one that you have not seen until now.

My proposition is that some processes in this department are seriously broken. We are, as the Personnel Committee has recently put it, "in a crisis". However I am submitting that the crisis is not centrally about salaries or support, rather it is a loss of cordiality and spirit, a dis-ease among us.

My recent four-year review process has served as the catalyst for this viewpoint; it has, so to speak, aroused me into action. So today, I will speak briefly about my experiences, some of my astonishment, what I see as our problem, and a road to its solution.

In so speaking, I will attempt to hold myself to a form of rigor, one simply of not exemplifying in my action the problem itself.

The overview is that we need to embrace

cooperative partnership,
complete openness of process, and
iterative improvement in our departmental interaction.

That is, I have higher goals for my working environment. I expect maturity, honest pleasantness, emotional health, constructive partnership, and a desire for growth.

MY EXPERIENCE

I came here with great expectations, and a fairly substantial confusion. Why was this department not flourishing? Why do we lack a history, suffer high turnover, harbor demoralization, lack a "known-fer"? In the four-year review process, I believe I have found a partial answer.

Part of my confusion is that I come from a very different culture, one in which the problems are sufficiently challenging to enforce a necessary cooperation and partnership. All of my confusion is my own responsibility,

and this presentation is a small component of my way of meeting my responsibility with appropriate action.

Now let me concretize for you with my personal example.

My short four-year review from the Personnel Committee was absolutely packed with "techniques of disrepute". I am referring to those techniques studied by the discipline of Social Psychology, techniques used to undermine, to malign, and generally to construct a false image. I found

- guilt by association
- guilt by false association
- casting aspersions
- citation of material not in the review file
- blindness to formative evaluation and iterative refinement
- misrepresentation
- negative speculation
- redefinition
- false scholarship
- hearsay
- nit-picking, and
- innuendo

What amazed me is that this document was signed and distributed to the School and to the Dean, without any apparent concern for the process of dialogue, for refinement and elucidation, or for political consequence.

The failure of dialog processes is simply non-collegial. The failure to collect relevant information is simply non-professional. The political naiveté is simply self-destructive behavior.

What are the simple consequences of my departmental review document?

1. Locally, I cannot trust you, my colleagues. And who would want to actively construct a non-trusting work environment?
2. The opinion of the School Committee is that this department cannot do its job. Who would elect to propagate an image of incompetence?
3. The Dean sees deep division. And this is particularly destructive. Who would expect to get any form of salary increase or support without demonstrating competence, unity, and worth?

My point is that a blind thrust of negativity indicates only immaturity. The appropriate attitude should be one of: "How can we best succeed together?"

DIALOGUE

I spoke personally to everyone involved, including substantive interaction with the Dean. What dominated my discussion with department members was a significant failure to take responsibility for this work product. Instead I heard characterizations such as

- circus of errors
- finger pointing
- unawareness
- non-intentionality
- infuriation with the internal process
- confusion about the rules
- failure to stay current with the policies
- acknowledgment of a poor job
- acknowledgment of an inability to do the job
- independence of the conclusions from the content
(that is, my review had little to do with my behavior!)
- allegations of corruption
- acknowledgment of confusion

The consequence of this potentially simple process was a massive waste of time, for many more people than just our department members, and political dismemberment of our own mutual objectives.

Well, as I said, I come from a culture where this form of behavior is simply not tolerated. I know of no responsible committee which would meet for nine meetings, or even for two, in a situation of missing information, without asking for that information. I know of no competent decision process that would exclude the primary participants.

It is as if we were beginning to run a marathon by facing the wrong direction. As if we were trying to build a city by burning bridges. Even as if we were trying to stab somebody in the back by cutting off our own noses.

The difficulty is not intolerance for diversity of opinion, it is the voluntary blindness which informs our opinions. The problem is not a concern for improvement through critical analysis, it is our failure to express this concern through constructive action.

I have submitted to the Dean that some processes in our department are mired in both non-professionalism and non-collegiality. Naturally, he expects me to address this in the department, directly with my colleagues. I personally want to create an expectation to move forward rapidly, at the same pace as the industry we serve.

LESSONS LEARNED

Here is what I have come away with.

1. The diversity, and perversity, of human nature is truly wonderful and inspiring. Here are people who marginalize their own credibility, oblivious to their own political milieu, while at the same time asking their management for more support.
2. The love of teaching is truly magnificent, benevolent and courageous. Without that love, who would choose to work for half their worth in such a corrosive environment?
3. There is absolutely no way I would place any form of trust or security in this set up as it is.
4. From our administration, I have also found out that the policies and procedures by which we regulate ourselves are largely of our own choice.

SOLUTIONS

For me to take responsibility for my own dignity here, I must then construct a path of growth and improvement. That path is to embrace partnership, to open all processes to all faculty, and to accept gradual social improvement through iterative refinement and debugging.

To begin, I will be filing this report in my personnel file, and following it up with reports of progress in addressing the issues throughout next year.

And here is what I will be pressing for next fall (please note that I am not suggesting any change in decision making authority):

1. No cabals: All communication and correspondence by all departmental committees is to be posted to all faculty members.
2. Cooperative pedagogy: Every faculty member should attend and review at least two classes of colleagues each quarter, and at least one class of each colleague each year.
3. Fuses: All decision processes should include an expiration date by which the decision will be made, if not by consensus then by majority. If not by majority, then by the involved parties.
4. Mature evaluative dialog: Face-to-face discussion between all review committees and those being reviewed, both prior to written reports and after written reports but prior to those reports leaving the department.

5. Voluntary self-improvement: Explicit buy-in by each member of the department to a program of interactional growth and health.

Thanks. I hope this stimulates reflection over the summer, and action when we meet again in the autumn.