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Resist the Rush to Judgment in Disputes

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HEADS UPAdvice for
academic
administrators

A senior professor scheduled a meeting with his dean to complain about his department chairwoman. He presented a litany of grievances that, in aggregate, suggested a serious case of harassment and retaliation.

She had refused to assign him evening classes even though he had taught at least one night class each semester for the previous decade. She had directed office staff members to quietly keep a record of his comings and goings -- whether he showed up for classes, whether he was on time, whether he kept his posted office hours, and so on. She had met privately with a number of his students and questioned them extensively about his habits.

She had even issued the unusual request that he turn in his syllabi for the classes he was teaching that semester -- an established departmental requirement that had seldom, if ever, been enforced.

"This is sheer harassment," he insisted. "I have always taught night classes." He complained bitterly that the chairwoman's "intrusive surveillance" of his movements constituted "a gross violation" of his privacy: "I have never in my 25 years in the academy suffered such an egregious infringement of my rights."

The professor concluded that the chairwoman "had it out" for him because he had opposed her appointment as department head. The suddenness of her interest in him and the aggressiveness of her surveillance seemed to suggest that she was motivated by a vendetta. He claimed that she had created a hostile workplace, and he demanded that the dean remove her from office. He threatened to involve his lawyer if nothing was done.

The dean was sympathetic. She was a champion of workplace collegiality and had worked hard to ensure that the college maintained its reputation for tolerance and diversity. People on the campus respected her for her keen sense of justice and fair play.

The dean summoned the chairwoman, certain that she had committed serious violations. While waiting for the meeting to begin, the dean contemplated what punishment would be most appropriate. She was determined to send a strong message that the college would not tolerate harassment or retaliation of any type.

Yet when the chairwoman arrived and began to discuss the case, it became clear that the case was not quite so cut and dried. The chairwoman explained that she had been responding to a longstanding problem with the professor. He was notorious in the department for neglecting his classroom responsibilities and other duties.

Most recently, the chairwoman had received a considerable number of complaints from both faculty members and students. His colleagues alleged that he often failed to show up for class, and staff members

confirmed that he never registered his absences, as university policy required. A colleague who taught at the same time in an adjacent classroom reported that when the professor did hold a class, he typically ended it halfway through the period.

His students complained that he was inaccessible and had so little contact with them that they were not learning anything. Not only did he frequently cancel or truncate classes, but he rarely held office hours. One student referred to him as her "absent teacher." A few students demonstrated that he graded papers by simply assigning a letter grade on the final page without providing any internal comments -- a very unusual practice in his discipline. The students were convinced that he had never even read their papers.

In short, the evidence suggested that the professor was drawing his salary in return for very little work. So the department head had collaborated with officials in human resources to devise a plan that included systematically gathering and documenting information on his classroom attendance. Because she was new to the job, the chairwoman had not thought to inform the dean of the ongoing investigation.

While the chair learned a valuable lesson from this incident -- always keep your dean in the loop -- the dean learned something, too: Never assume that the version of events before you is true or complete, regardless of how convincing it sounds.

It's a daily reality for most academic administrators that people present us with compelling accounts of some issue in dispute and then implore us to take action based on their version of events. And it's all too easy to leap to the conclusion that the most recent narrative is the "truth" -- especially if the issue at hand happens to be a hot-button concern of ours, as was the case with the dean who championed workplace collegiality.

The dean was predisposed to be supportive of victims of retaliation and was already on the alert for discrimination. That's admirable, but it caused her to rush to judgment in this case.

To be effective, academic administrators must possess skills common to seasoned judges: the ability to balance stories and perspectives judiciously before arriving at a decision, to sort through the facts and the various parties' potential motives, to detect whether someone's prejudices are obscuring the facts, and to set aside personal preconceptions and biases.

We all are susceptible to a rush to judgment, especially given our considerable daily workload and our desire to dispose of cases expeditiously. The most effective administrators monitor themselves constantly to avoid potentially costly blunders.

After extensive investigation, the dean ultimately ruled that both narratives contained some truth. The professor was correct that the chairwoman had been quick to initiate her investigation, in part, because she resented his lack of support for her appointment. But the chairwoman was correct, nonetheless, in opening the investigation because the professor was guilty of chronic dereliction of duty and violation of numerous university rules and regulations.

The chairwoman was reprimanded and required to apologize formally to the professor. The professor was given the option to pay restitution to the university, in the form of returning a portion of his salary, or to take early retirement. He chose the latter.

In many ways, such "he-said, she-said" scenarios constitute a kind of administrative gestalt. The key is to be able to look once and see a goblet, look a second time and see two faces, and look a third time and see all of those images.

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