CCAU Case Study - New Dean Inheriting a Dysfunctional Department

Challenge

You are the new dean of a college. As a new dean you regard this department as one of most dysfunctional you have ever seen. You are faced with a contentious situation requiring appointment of a new department chair and moving this unit back toward vibrancy. It's a complicated situation.

The prior dean removed the previous chair as a result of serious procedural errors in the handling of tenure cases, though the problems in her department went further than that. The department practices faculty governance to the extreme, making all decisions through "committee as a whole" discussions; even the smallest decisions are debated endlessly in faculty meetings—which are held every two weeks. The department rarely gets anything done and the last department chair was indecisive and noncommittal when asked for her views. The departmental debates surfaced personal animosities and disciplinary differences, and discussions over specific policies and decisions invariably cycled back into rehearsing the same longstanding resentments. Ironically, the former department chair would lobby for resources and recognition as if the faculty were highly productive, when objective indicators show them to be poor scholars and declining in productivity, student recruitment, and graduation rates.

The prior leader's advocacy for resources for the unit and refusal to take sides in departmental squabbles won her broad support from her faculty, and her removal and replacement with an interim chair (who came from outside the department, and was chosen by the previous dean) is a flashpoint of anger within the department. Their Bylaws explicitly say that a department chair, even an interim, must be approved by a majority vote of the faculty in the department.

How will you resolve the ongoing issues in this department?

Academic Unit Diagnostic Tool (AUDiT)

This table sets out in three columns of characteristics of health units (green column), units heading for challenges (yellow column) and units in difficulty (red column). The AUDiT can be used to assess any unit and is set out here in its entireity for reference. The cells in color are highlighted and scored as particularly relevant to this situation.

Vibrant Units 0-5		Warning Signs 0-3		Challenged Units 0-5	
Respectful dealings among colleagues, across departments	3	**Complaints disproportionate to other units campus**	2	**serious misconduct, discrimination, sexual, financial, criminal, etc. (arrests, lawsuits)**	1
openness, transparency, shared governance		**email wars, harassment, silos, conflict aversion**	2	containment culture, faculty schisms, battles, flareups	
culture of excellence and quality; strong candidates		weak or ineffective hiring; requests for transfers, departures		repeated inability to hire, retain quality faculty, staff	
Support and mentoring for faculty and students alike		weak P&T practices; many terminal associate professors		toxic atmosphere, especially for junior faculty, students	
open discussion of ideas and research; high productivity		declining scholarly indicators (productive, PhDs, PhD placement, time to degree,..)		**scholarly standing below university's; uneven unit**	4
distributed service responsibilities aligned with faculty strengths		**limited sense of priorities**	3	**departmental business at a standstill; in gridlock**	4
high level of communication - willingness to listen, compromise		ad hoc practices; forum-shopping; seeking desired answers from different offices		lack of transparency, hidden agendas; faculty involve students in disputes	
curricular innovations, adaptations to meet changing student, campus, needs		enrollment declines, lack of curricular innovation		**curricular stagnation, lack of student interest in offerings; outdated curriculum**	3
leadership has high expectations, uses policies, makes decisions, builds community		bimodal evaluations; generational discord, externalizing problems		**weak or autocratic leadership; different messages to different audiences**	1
collective vision of goals and priorities		many individual priorities without shared purpose		financial disarray	
TOTAL:	3		-7		-13
					17

Unit Assessment

Academic:

The department is not handling its tenure cases well. There have been serious procedural errors. Productivity is declining. They are having trouble recruiting and producing strong students. These are the most critical markers indicating a need for the dean to act.

The dean may also have a serious procedural issue, if there is no university mechanism for putting a unit into receivership or suspending the unit's bylaws. Their bylaws call for leaders to be endorsed by faculty vote.

Cultural:

Gridlock through extreme governance-by-consensus is a serious cultural problem that is not easily addressed and yet is the key to the recovery of the unit.

There are serious problems the department faces: failure in tenure cases, student success, overall productivity. These problems are affecting engagement and morale.

Leadership:

The interim chair holds little credibility in the unit.

The bylaws for selecting a new chair will make it difficult to put one in place, as there are few that would please enough of the faculty to win a majority vote.

Unit Health:

educational mission	not strong (C)
scholarship	not strong (C)
service	poor (D)
governance meets ethical, legal standards	poor (D)

Solution Path

Build a team:

- The dean will be required to to step in; and because tenure is involved the Provost needs to be represented and on board with actions to be taken, especially if the unit is determined to be central to the college or the university mission.

- Other team members might be: the interim chair; an associate dean; a representative from HR; possibly a representative from Legal (to support changes to the bylaws).

Collect Information Systematically:

- Objectively seek information about the department and establish indicators of success.

- Data that will be helpful to collect:

- the budget and other financial resources

- productivity of the department over time

- what decisions have been made in the past several years

- A new chair could be sought; or, some formal mechanism for suspending independent unit governance and stipulating conditions for when they will recover their own governance might be useful. Consult the university's statutes, regulations, and policies; establish what must be done to follow them scrupulously. This will protect you, the interim chair, the new chair, and the faculty, and make forward progress possible.

Activate the people of goodwill:

- The department was supportive of the previous leader since she advocated for more resources and they liked the status quo.

- Still, there are likely those within the unit who are tired of the internal friction. It will be important to identify and involve these individuals constructively going forward.

- A fresh view could be useful; an external review to gain an external disciplinary perspective might be called for, or some form of interviewing for climate assessment.

- Are there respected members of the unit who have withdrawn into their own scholarship or engaged elsewhere on campus because of the situation who might be candidates for leading the unit through recovery if appropriately mentored and supported?

- Are there others on campus who are members of the discipline with the right leadership qualities?

Develop a plan with specific steps:

- The first step is an assessment of the unit's centrality and importance to the college and university. A full effort must be made if those are high. If not, the dean is faced with balancing the political capital it will take to address this problem.

- Establish targets for improvements to the curriculum and evaluate progress against these.

- Create and publicize expectations for how decisions are made and how communication occurs.

- It may be useful to call for an external review, assess the budget and resources, and see if there are formal mechanisms in the university for restricting graduate admissions, etc.

- Provide the members of the unit with the option to develop their own strategic plan within specific parameters, and a facilitator to participate in their discussions; this is a path that has worked in a number of settings.

- A strong interim chair, if the authority to appoint one can be established, could serve in this role, or an interim chair working with a facilitator.

Be patient and adaptable:

- Bringing the members of the unit along, and helping them confront a reality that is different than their self-perceptions will be a gradual process and may require regular assessment and course-correction.

- Looking at the composition of the faculty and considering ways to dilute or bring other experiences and perspectives into the unit could help.

- If an external leader is sought, some of the hardest problems should be addressed before the leader arrives, and new resources of some sort provided to the new leader.

- Taking action now will make it easier to recruit and retain a quality leader, as a long-term solution to these problems.