

CCAUA Case Study - Resistance to Transparent Communication

Challenge

As the new dean, you think it is important to talk to the faculty across the college and you are encountering resistance from department heads and faculty alike as you do so. The established practice in the college used by the previous dean was to communicate only with department heads, relying upon them to relay information to their faculties. You are prepared to believe that this model is used for the best of reasons, and you want to keep an open mind in case there are other agendas in play. Two unit heads in particular are objecting to your approach, one more strongly than the other, and your analysis is that it is because each of them adjusts information they provide to the faculties for reasons of their own: they were accustomed to and prefer a model in which they control information flow to their units.

Your sense is that the previous dean was not aware of the extent to which this was happening, a sense reinforced by some of the pushback you are getting. The most contentious topic is your move to provide transparent financial information within the college. When you started, you shared full financial information with your heads, and asked them to convey to their units that a larger discussion would be taking place this year. Now you are finding significant discrepancies between the information provided to the heads and that passed along to their departments.

One department head in particular is most adamant that your approach violates boundaries and is inappropriate. She has directly asked you to stop sharing information with her faculty, saying it is undercutting her and unreasonably making her job more difficult. As context, her unit is quite weak, in part because of actions of the previous head, who was a poor communicator that did not make strong decisions. He supported several underwhelming tenure cases that in your estimation were mistakes. His fourth-year unit review submissions were not useful or constructive and did not provide a foundation for planning. It is clear that he was not willing to take the time to write coherent feedback or think critically about the future of the unit, and withheld or adapted a great deal of information about hard decisions looming out of the financial position and trajectory of the college. His successor has continued the practice of regularly adapting messages and information to gain the support of various constituencies, and has suggested that she thinks your approach is part of a strategy to get only the answers you want from the current strategic planning process.





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 entirety 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	Complaints disproportionate to other units campus		serious misconduct, discrimination, sexual, financial, criminal, etc. (arrests, lawsuits)	
Openness, transparency, shared governance	email wars, harassment, silos, conflict aversion		containment culture, faculty schisms, battles, flareups	2
Culture of excellence and quality; strong candidates	weak or ineffective hiring ; requests for transfers, departures	2	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	2
Distributed service responsibilities aligned with faculty strengths	limited sense of priorities	2	departmental business at a standstill; in gridlock	
High level of communication - willingness to listen, compromise	ad hoc practices; forum-shopping; seeking desired answers from different officers	3	lack of transparency, hidden agendas; faculty involve students in disputes	4
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	
Leadership has high expectations, uses policies, makes decisions, builds community	2 bimodal evaluations; generational discord, externalizing problems		weak or autocratic leadership; different messages to different audiences	4
Collective vision of goals and priorities	many individual priorities without shared purpose	2	financial disarray	
TOTAL:	2	-9		-12
				-19





Unit Assessment

Academic:

Leadership in this unit has invested only marginally in reviews and critical evaluations. Departmental standing is slipping.

Cultural:

Instead of leading open discussions among the faculty, the department head seems to prioritize her own views. The faculty seem to be unaware of this practice and seem to be operating on the premise that the information they are receiving is accurate and complete. The result is that the faculty are uninformed about what is happening on the university level and about the challenges facing the college. The dean is trying to get the faculty more involved, and encountered challenges in doing so. The priorities of the department appear to be driven by the head.

Interpersonal:

The faculty do not seem to be fully informed or fully participating in governance. The head seems to act on her own without soliciting alternative views or directions. These actions have been successful and without consequence to date, making it easy for her to continue as she has been.

Leadership:

The head has not left much room for opinions and discussion, appearing to make most of the decisions herself. While the faculty appear to be aware of daily decisions, they are given incomplete information the effect of which is to sway them in the direction the leader supports. This is an established practice, one on which they have settled for two leaders; there is not much indication that the faculty has any desire for or comfort with another approach. All indications are that the present leader has significant support in the unit as things stand.

Unit Health:

educational mission	average (B)
scholarship	average (B and falling)
service	unknown (N/A)
governance meets ethical, legal standards	not strong (C)

Solution path

Introduce a model of increased transparency across the college, including within this unit.

What does success look like?

Faculty will increase their engagement in the dialogue about the future of the college and individual units. Unit heads will work more closely with the dean and actively disseminate information, while communicating college and unit priorities to faculty. Scholarly standing will improve.





Build a team:

Now is the time to build a team to help chart the future of the college so you are not isolated and/or misrepresented going forward.

Team members to consider:

- Associate deans in the college: are they respected members of the college? Other staff or faculty? Do they have good networks and credibility within the college? Can they be part of a positive team changing the atmosphere going forward?
- Other unit heads and faculty members college-wide: continuing to lay out the choices and financial decisions to be made. Seek options for including the faculty as members of the larger institution, and underline the importance of having their voice and thoughts heard beyond their department heads; this will encourage them to speak up whenever they notice any irregularities, and will allow for a better flow of information between the faculty and the dean.
- Provost/associate provost: does the provost support your move to more transparency? Will s/he engage as needed to reinforce the challenges facing the college and the degrees of self-determination available if the faculty choose to engage?

What mechanisms for information sharing are available and fit the institution culturally? Would it be more effective in the existing culture for the dean to visit each unit serially, presenting the same information and engaging in discussion with the faculty (perhaps providing information in advance), or holding a college-wide open forum?

How strong are your own communication staff? do you have resources and channels to craft visually-compelling/data-rich information internally that will not undercut your external messaging?

Collect Information Systematically:

Focus on what you are trying to accomplish and why. Develop themes and concise statements of the facts and information you are seeking to share more broadly: articulate the directions that need to be set/strategic planning. How clear and comprehensible is the financial information you seek to share? Will different presentations of the data make it more accessible to faculty (depending upon discipline, the mode of presentation may significantly affect faculty willingness to engage)?

Review what is known about what the department heads have been saying to their faculties. This will help in understanding what was correct and what was adapted. Understanding what the faculty know may assist in areas that require the most clarification/communication effort.

Separate the unit under-performance issue from the issues of shared governance and information flow/transparency, and assemble specific data on the unit's scholarly standing, performance, and trends. Consider whether an external review of the unit may be helpful.





Activate the people of goodwill:

By creating and normalizing new channels of communication across the college including faculty and staff, you may render the people of goodwill more comfortable in speaking up. It may require investments of time to prepare opinion leaders in units (executive or advisory committees, for example, or all full professors, etc.) with separate meetings in advance of unit-wide or college-wide meetings. Consider creating a college-wide faculty advisory council that receives information through alternative channels. Much will depend on the local culture and finding ways to start changing the culture without undue repercussions on you personally as the new dean.

Consult the university's governance documents, and those of the college, to determine if mechanisms exist for faculty advisory groups within units and college-wide; if their authorization exists and the practice has atrophied, consider re-vitalizing them.

Review what faculty consultation mechanisms are in use elsewhere on campus successfully; seek out peer colleagues for advice on this point.

Develop a plan with specific steps:

Two separate issues have been identified.

1. Improving flow of information within the college, with the goals of engaging the faculty more broadly in governance and strategic planning/consequential decisions about the future of the college/financial decisions, and ensuring information is available to those that can benefit from it.

Possible steps:

- Articulate firmly and clearly the new process for improving communication college-wide to address decisions for the future of the college: between the dean and the department heads and the faculty, among the departments, and among the faculty/staff college-wide. Describe transparency in action.
- Consider strategic nominations of college faculty to campus-wide committees (seek the support of the provost in assuring that several key appointments can be made) to open alternative channels of information into the college.
- Articulate expectations for heads in working with the new dean, including evaluation criteria that will include engaging faculty more broadly--vetoing the dean's communication plans is not an option.
- Encourage the heads to communicate priorities to faculty.

This plan focuses on socializing the information and avoiding communication gridlock. By implementing measures that allow and encourage the faculty to contact the dean and to speak up in case of irregularities this one-way, vertical system is neutralized, effectively reducing the amount of power the department heads hold.

2. Managing the underperformance problem in this specific unit.

Possible steps:





- Establish the cause of the problem. While the management style of the previous head seems to be a contributing factor, it is unlikely to explain it fully.
- Address the problem of a lack of feedback by instituting a new review system that allows gathering actual and precise information about the state of the department. If the college or campus has an institutional research unit, or a standard reporting dashboard for key performance metrics, it should be updated for all units in the college and reviewed. If neither exists, a baseline set of metrics, with five-year trends, should be assembled for the unit.
- Review the reported weak tenure cases from the department. Consider implications for future hiring.
- Articulate expectations about the unit's performance, both short and long term. Be specific about objectives for scholarly standing.

Be patient and adaptable:

These changes might require some time to become the 'new norm'. The system described above appears to have been in place for some time, and both the faculty and the heads may take some time to adapt to a more open and transparent system. The key to the transformative process is to encourage and reassure the faculty, and this will require time.

