Vocal Minority—Dissent over Direction

Challenge

To modernize its curriculum and build on its traditional areas of strength, the department established a case for an additional faculty line for a new area of creative work. This was consistent with the campus strategic plan and was approved. In 2008, Assistant Professor Joshua Kingman was hired. The approval and hiring were high points in the morale of the department. Kingman was welcomed into the unit.

About the same time as funding was provided to open the new line of creative work, the department and college chose not to offer a position to the husband of a senior member of the faculty, Dorothy Hinchley. After that rejection, Professor Hinchley started questioning the decision to go into the new area, arguing that it would inexorably lead to a decrease in the number of faculty in the unit's main area of strength, on which its reputation was built. Over time, she has gained the backing of six or so other colleagues in the department (about a third), and the unit started to polarize around this issue.

Kingman had a very positive third-year review, but when he came up for tenure two years later, his case was controversial and the department's vote was split. Hinchley and her allied colleagues argued that the decision should not rest only on the actual qualifications of Kingman; it should also take into account the financial exigency created by his hire and its implications for the future. The chair strongly endorsed Kingman's case, and the college committee approved it unanimously, a decision echoed at the campus level. Kingman was granted tenure.

The rift in the unit widened, and there is now an explicit agenda among the disaffected faculty members to isolate the new area from other areas in the department. Kingman is still succeeding in attracting students, though he feels increasingly isolated and worried about the future. He is being contacted by other institutions to test his level of interest in moving. The department chair believes that mediation is not an option, because the faculty enlisted by Hinchley now assertively argue that the area of creative work is useless, and a waste of resources. Three of these faculty have not published in more than five years, though others of the group are quite productive.

How will you approach dealing with this unit?

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	1	Complaints disproportionate to other units campus		serious misconduct, discrimination, sexual, financial, criminal, etc. (arrests, lawsuits)	
openness, transparency, shared governance	2	**email wars, harassment, silos, conflict aversion**	2	**containment culture, faculty schisms, battles, flareups**	3
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**	4
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	
distributed service responsibilities aligned with faculty strengths		limited sense of priorities		**departmental business at a standstill; in gridlock**	3
high level of communication - willingness to listen, compromise	1	ad hoc practices; forum-shopping; seeking desired answers from different officers		**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**	3
leadership has high expectations, uses policies, makes decisions, builds community		**bimodal evaluations; generational discord, externalizing problems**	5	weak or autocratic leadership; different messages to different audiences	
collective vision of goals and priorities	1	**many individual priorities without shared purpose**	4	**financial disarray**	4
	6		-9		-20
					-23

Unit Assessment

Academic:

The faculty consensus was initially positive about opening a new area of scholarship to broaden and modernize. They worked well together to hire a promising new scholar in that area. The subsequent questions about this strategy has, in the assessment of the chair and others who have reviewed the situation, largely been instigated by one faculty member. Those who have looked at it understand her unhappiness to be rooted in her conviction that adding the new line foreclosed employment in the unit for her husband who was denied a spousal appointment. Some faculty members have not published in several years.

Cultural:

A conflict has developed within the department on priorities and how to allocate resources. Casting doubt on the decision to start a new area of research has caused a rift within the department. Even the lack of action to address the situation has affected morale.

Interpersonal:

The conflict within the department is perceived to have started with a single faculty member, Professor Hinchley. A faction has developed behind her.

Leadership:

The department head has not managed to handle conflict effectively, and it is coming to dominate every aspect of the unit's governance and community.

Unit Health:

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

Solution Path

Build a team:

Alone, the chair does not seem to be making much progress; an assessment involving the college office, and perhaps the Office of the Provost to examine resources and options is a good first step.

Collect information systematically:

What does success look like? What is the desired outcome for the unit? How happy are unit members with the situation and direction? What characterizes the division within the department? Are faculty members being deprived by new directions? Is that inevitable or is there

synergy to be discovered and unleashed? Working to explore these and other issues is the key, as is a realistic assessment of the unit's viability under the old plan and with new directions added.

It will be helpful to assess and seek to disentangle the intertwined issues underlying the departmental rift. Understanding the perspectives and concerns of individuals in the unit is key to this approach. In many situations, those who are against the new area of creative research might be basing their decision on resources they perceive are lacking, whether that is related (or not) to the new hire.

For instance, perhaps the reality or perception is that the startup package for the new hire postponed or ruled out departmental support for other faculty members. These issues may have more merit if the startup for the new hire were larger than previous packages. The rationale for the package, its source of funding, and how the funds were spent might merit review. How transparent were these decisions and how much factual information is available to the faculty? How open have budgetary decisions been in the unit? How well understood are funding options and sources?

A separate question is what issues caused the coalition to form: identifying 6-7 examples of recurring statements in the department's discussions about the resource allocation would be helpful. It will be difficult to argue that the new hire was a waste of resources if the new area of creative research has been productive. However, it is important to identify who is reviewing the progress of the new creative area and make sure they are not negatively biased towards it. It is important to get a clear picture of what the problem is and what merit the grievances have.

Separately, identify the support you can you find for Professor Hinchley's grievances. What are the credentials of Hinchely's husband? Is there spousal hire program? Would he have qualified for it? Was it considered? How was his application considered?

Activate the people of goodwill:

There are two main groups in the department. It will be helpful to get more people from the opposing side to realize what is going on and become supportive of initiatives to improve the internal climate. One approach is to bring back the time when there was a consensus in the department. Revisiting the rationale behind the initial plan may be useful. Finding the point where everyone agreed will also help pinpoint when things started to change.

Develop a plan with specific steps:

The overall strategy in a unit with a significant schism is to divide and conquer: separate out individual issues from group agendas and act upon those that have merit. First, gather data and to assess issues and root causes. Then, develop consensus around issues and whether they have merit. Identify areas where departmental business can be moved forward in consensus, even if these are small points. Encourage and reward transparency and communication. Address the issues that can be addressed, making sure to not reward bad behavior. Finally, activate the people of goodwill by reminding them of what was agreed upon.

Be patient and adaptable:

As information is gained and individual perspectives are understood, the overall strategy may require adaptation. If the unit's overall understanding of their status and standing are not clear, an external review or other comparisons with peer units may be required for a reality test. In time, crystallize the shared purpose(s) of the department and work to expand faculty members' views to incorporate individual priorities into a unified vision.