



CCAU Case Study - Autocratic Leader

Challenge

A major unit that reports to you is floundering. A complicating factor is that the director has been in place for almost two decades, and is widely credited with elements of its earlier excellence. For years, it was in the top 10 in its field, but it fell out of that group some time ago, and there are indications that its decline is continuing. Enrollment is down, and applications, especially at the graduate level, are down dramatically. This might be directly linked to the lack of curricular innovation and reduced scholarly activity and visibility by the faculty. The unit hasn't made a strong hire in four years, and two of the respected tenured faculty have left in that time. There hasn't been an external review of the unit in some time, as it seems simply to have fallen between the cracks—with some nudging by the director, who in any case argues that such reviews are not that useful.

The director is not a good communicator, nor is he tech savvy: he has every email printed so that he can read them on paper, for example. He does not respond to them electronically and instead writes responses by hand, which are later typed into e-mails by the staff. This is time consuming and inefficient for all involved. The director does not delegate nor consult much, which has caused the members of the unit to withdraw and focus on their individual interests. Few have been participating even in recruitment processes or searches. He is the one deciding the unit's course and setting its priorities. While he is a resolute and decisive leader, this managing style, where he expects to supervise everything and make every decision. Thus he neutralizes the rest of the members of the unit, preventing them from taking the lead or initiative, which ultimately disincentivizes them from engaging in the unit's decision making.

What do you do?



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	2	Complaints disproportionate to other units on 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	
Culture of excellence and quality; strong candidates		Weak or ineffective hiring; requests for transfers, departures		Repeated inability to hire, retain quality faculty, staff	3
Support and mentoring for faculty and students alike	3	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,..)	3	Scholarly standing below university's; uneven unit	
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		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	1	Curricular stagnation, lack of student interest in offerings; outdated curriculum	
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	4



Collective vision of goals and priorities		Many individual priorities without shared purpose	2	Financial disarray	
TOTAL:	5		-8		-7
					-10





Unit Assessment

This is not a unit that is actively causing any problems, so might not be getting the systematic examination and attention it needs—the lapse in external reviews seems to suggest this. At the same time, the unit receives scarce resources, is enrolling students, and is part of your college. It is time to assess whether its day has come and gone or to adopt a plan to restore it to vibrancy. (Put another way: nothing is on fire, and that doesn't mean there's not a problem requiring action.)

Academic:

Qualified members of the faculty are leaving. The director's leadership style does not foster progress or vibrancy in the unit. All action revolves around this person, he makes every decision, reducing the efficiency of the unit and affecting both students and faculty.

Cultural:

All of the priorities seem to be driven by the unit director and the faculty has ceded control to him. His unwillingness to use technology plus his poor communication skills have been accepted within and beyond the unit, and are undermining effective unit functioning, including (presumably) advancement.

Leadership:

What is expected of a leader in the institution: is communication with constituencies, including external ones for advancement, central to position responsibilities? If so, his current style might be addressed as a form of not meeting fundamental expectations for unit leadership. Internal to the unit, it may feel safe and any changes seen as threatening—or its members may welcome a chance to change course. They are acclimated to a director who is decisive and takes charge of most situations. Faculty have not been engaged in governance choices, and have had the luxury of spending all their time on individual work without any service work; few have participated in any recent searches or recruitment. There doesn't seem to be any room (or desire) for opinion or decision making from the faculty.

Unit Health:

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

Solution path

Changes in unit to revitalize its mission and vibrancy, or assess its continued viability/need. There are interlocking issues: the director's style/level of engagement and the unit's overall trends in its critical functions.





Elements for consideration:

- how do these performance issues affect other units for which you are responsible? how central is the unit and how important it is to address the problems? do its performance issues affect other units on campus? central college missions? student success?
- working with the director to address the challenges—or to encourage him to step down
- an external review to help provide perspective and guidance

What does success look like?

- renewed scholarly vibrancy in production of scholarship
- revitalized curriculum
- re-engagement of faculty in service to unit and campus
- improved communication and transparency of leadership

Build a team:

1) mission vibrancy

- external review / collection of data, trends
- plan for future: restore to vibrancy or decision about unit future

2) leadership style and effectiveness

The current director's leadership style is not serving the unit well. It is likely past time to intervene in some way to help him lead more more effectively or to make a change. Either way, he must be treated with respect and dignity in light of his longtime service: every member of the unit (and beyond) will be watching how he is treated.

- Human resources and legal counsel may need to be consulted, whether in an effort to provide him coaching or to seek a change in leadership.
- If the decision is to replace the director, an outside hire might be considered. The unit's current state makes success for an inside promotion improbable, as the unit is used to the strong grip and autocratic leadership of the current director.
- Start developing leaders among the current faculty or use that as a criterion in future hires in the unit if the unit is to continue in its current form.

Collect Information Systematically:

- Review the unit's performance internally or externally—performance metrics and trends over time; comparison to disciplinary standards, etc.
- Interview department members to identify possible leaders. Part of the interview process should also determine who is willing to participate in making changes immediately.
- Encourage unit members to grapple with trend data on their standing and productivity, as well as compared with peer units.



- The solution will heavily rely on the faculty's ability to change and adapt to a new, more participative model. In order for it to work new leaders have to be spotted and promoted within the unit.

Activate the people of goodwill:

It may take some time to develop leaders among the current faculty given that they have abdicated their role in shared governance for so long. New habits and procedures are likely needed.

Delegating responsibility and encouraging participation in the department's projects is essential to the success of this change. The new communication system and the faculty involvement must be supported by the university, the dean and the department head.

Develop a plan with specific steps:

It is important to note that this unit's problems emanate from two different sources, the unit's director, and the faculty. Although the main source of the unit's problems is the iron grip that the director exerts on the unit, and his lack of technological understanding, the problem goes beyond the unit leader. The whole unit seems to have adapted to this kind of leadership, and they seem unable to show any type of initiative, which seriously affects the unit's productivity and work quality.

To solve this problem, the solution will necessarily have to deal with these two issues:

- some measures for improved communication, including both receiving information and sharing information with internal and external constituencies
- appropriate shared governance, including succession planning and faculty engagement in institutional service

Be patient and adaptable:

Change takes place slowly. Some metrics for success and progress milestones should be identified and clearly articulated to the unit.