



Case Study: New Dean and 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 previous 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 they were great, when all objective indicators show them to be poor scholars and declining in productivity, students, etc.

The advocacy for resources for the unit and the previous leader's refusal to take sides in departmental squabbles won her broad support from her faculty, and her removal and replacement with an interim chair chosen by the previous dean from outside the department 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.

Third Person POV

A college has just appointed a new dean who is grappling with a seriously troubled unit. The previous dean removed the department chair because she made serious procedural errors in the handling of tenure cases and because the unit had become paralyzed by taking faculty governance to the extreme. They tried to make all decisions through committees as a whole discussion; even the smallest decisions were debated endlessly in faculty meetings—which were held every two weeks. The department could rarely get anything done and the department chair was indecisive and noncommittal when asked her views of issues. These 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 department chair would lobby for resources and recognition as if they were great, when all objective indicators showed them to be poor scholars and declining in productivity, students, etc. But her advocacy for resources for her unit and her refusal to take sides in departmental squabbles won her broad support from her faculty, and her removal and replacement with an interim chair chosen by the previous dean from outside the department 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.



Metadata/Tags

weak leadership, new dean, dysfunctional department, indecisive, resentment, decline, poor administrative hygiene, poor decision making, excess consensus

Unit Assessment

Academic:

- The department is not handling its tenure cases well, including serious procedural errors, and is declining in productivity. They are having trouble recruiting and producing strong students. These are the most critical markers indicating a need for the dean to act.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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. Some formal mechanism for suspending that provision and stipulating conditions for when they will recover their own governance would be useful. Consulting the university's statutes/regulations/policies/practices and following them scrupulously is in order--to protect the dean and make forward progress possible.

Cultural:

- The gridlock through extreme governance is a serious cultural problem that is not easily addressed and yet is the key to the recovery of the unit. Possible options include:
 - Looking at the composition of the faculty and considering ways to dilute or bring other experiences and perspectives into the unit could help.
 - A gifted interim leader with some form of carrot or stick to encourage meaningful faculty governance may help. That is, if the unit is in formal receivership, the conditions for leaving receivership could include faculty consensus on curriculum revitalization, faculty hires, etc. If the plan is effective in the judgment of external experts (disciplinary or within the university, depending on particulars), the outcome could be leaving receivership--and potentially new hires, which will in turn help change/dilute the unit's culture. This is only effective if the new members are well mentored and protected from old battles and toxicity.

Leadership:

- Are there respected members of the unit who have withdrawn into their own scholarship or engaged elsewhere on campus because of the situation internally 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?
- 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, so his or her job is not all being the heavy and is not associated with all the problems only. It will be difficult to recruit a quality leader without taking those steps and retention will be even more difficult.



Academic Unit Profile

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	3	Complaints disproportionate to other units on 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 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		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



Solution

Build a team:

- There are serious problems the department faces: failure in tenure cases, student success, overall productivity.
- Will require the dean to step in
- Other suggested team members might be: interim chair; associate dean and/or dean; maybe someone from HR or legal (because of the bylaws challenges) or provost office/faculty affairs, depending on configuration of university to determine.

Collect Information Systematically:

- It will be easy to objectively find information about the department and state indicators of success.
- Data that will be helpful to collect:
 - Assess the budget and resources
 - Look for formal mechanisms in the university for restricting graduate admissions
 - Look at productivity of department over time
 - See what decisions have been made in the past several years

Activate the people of goodwill:

- The department was supportive of the 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 see how to identify 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.

Develop a plan with specific steps:

- Some mechanism for bringing facts and perspective to bear is likely needed, and that process is likely to indicate general outlines of next steps.
- Providing the members of the unit with the option to develop their own strategic plan within specific parameters, and providing a facilitator to participate in their discussions 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-perception will be a gradual process and may require regular assessment and course-correction.