

Resolving Conflicts Within and Outside the Department

The following scenario is not based upon actual facts. Any resemblance to similar facts is coincidental.

Background

As part of UIC's goal to advance interdisciplinary programs through the promotion of innovative research while enhancing diversity, two deans at UIC have joined forces to attract a husband and wife team, who as senior faculty members will bring with them several large research grants and a small team of three less senior faculty members. In turn, this team will create at least 7 to 10 grad assistant or post-doc positions from at least three departments. The Provost is very supportive of this effort and hopes that it will serve as a model for future interdisciplinary activities.

One issue the two deans need to address is the space needs of the two lead researchers, who will be arriving in 6 weeks, and the longer term needs of the full team. The dean of College A has assigned his Associate Dean (AD) to locate space. After considering possible locations, AD seems to have identified most of the needed space, which fortunately is located within a single department that is part of the initiative. The AD is initially hopeful because it appears that there is additional unused space contiguous to the participating department. However, he learns that this space is currently assigned to a faculty member in a department that is not involved in or likely to become part of the initiative.

According to AD, he has visited this space four times and each time he saw "no sign of real activity." AD reported to the Dean that it is a private office with one larger space that could easily accommodate 4 workstations, in which he observed thick dust on the file cabinets, no functional equipment, and no computers. He picked up only one of the phones and there was no signal or tone. At his last visit, he happened to run into the janitor, so he asked if the office was occupied. The janitor said that he hadn't seen "anyone in the space for a good year, year and a half," even though he stops by regularly to see if there is any trash to collect or anything they might need.

The Conflict

The AD then contacts the Department Head (DH) whose faculty member is assigned the apparently unused space and scheduled a walk-through. After hearing of the importance attributed to this effort by the Provost and his Dean, DH agrees that the request for the space was reasonable and that he would meet with the faculty member. He does express some concern that his department was paying for commitments made by others, saying that his department would be supporting another of the Administration's pet projects. He fears that the repeated loss of resources was losing him credibility with his faculty.

DH then meets with the faculty member (FM), explains the request for her space, and summarizes AD's report and their visit. FM is outraged and quickly refutes the claim

that she is not using the space. When DH counters with the information learned from the janitor, FM grows angrier. “Since when do we go to janitors to check up on faculty members? This is racist and discriminatory! Would you listen to the janitorial staff if it involved a straight, white, male faculty member? You gave me this space five years ago when I came here. It was part of my start-up agreement when you wanted me to ‘enhance diversity.’ You even gave me special funds! Well, I guess I am not your ‘minority *du jour*’ anymore. I’m not going to stand for it. I can go other places, you know...but before I do, I am going to see my lawyer!”

DH informs AD of the outcome, explaining that he can appreciate FM’s view. The department worked hard to recruit her and she has helped expand their curriculum and worked with a number of promising students. He also believes that her research is ready to take off. “So what statement will I be making if I do not support her now? Will the faculty have any confidence in me when they need support from me?”

AD insists that sexual orientation, race, and gender has had nothing to do with a space decision and reminds DH that space is not owned by a department, and neither the faculty member nor the department should view it as theirs. AD also promises that if FM gets additional funding, he will find her the space she needs.

DH hesitates before concluding, “I don’t think you understand. I don’t know if I can continue in this role. I’m just sick and tired of these games with Administration. I have to support my faculty. I have to try to keep them from leaving.”

On that note, DH leaves the meeting and AD sits in his chair, contemplating what he should do next. He wonders out loud, “Is there anything worse than space wars?”

Discussion:

- What are the issues for AD, DH, and FM? How do they differ? What interests are shared?
- Are there any facts that could have been checked out first?
- If you were advising the individuals here, what are some possible outcomes you could pursue with each party? Ask them to consider?