

Abusive Administration: A Case Study¹

Anne L. Jefferson

In the academic world, there is an assumption of reasonable administrative conduct. In fact, to ensure such conduct, universities, like other public institutions, may have collective agreements to reinforce this assumption. However, in some cases, the university as employer can very quickly off the mark should any faculty member wander into what it considers unacceptable conduct. At the same time, university administrators may not hold themselves to the same standard. This case study provides an illustration whereby the double standard revealed abusive action by administration. The case omits names of individuals for they are not the intended focus. Rather, the process that evolved is the focus of this commentary because of how it was used by the administration to evade accountability for alleged abusive actions. It is an example of a technique commonly used by those in power who seek to secure their position without investigation.

The Scenario

The events described below occurred within an institute of higher learning and involved multilevels of administration and the professional ranks within one sector of the institute. For a number of years, there had been tension between the administration of this sector and the professionals. For some, life had become a series of grievances against the administration. For others, life had become political survival whereby survival required aligning oneself with the administration unquestioningly or being prepared to depart unceremoniously. Still, others flourished as they were rewarded (or as some claimed, "bought") for the promotion of the administration. All in all, the work environment was tense and unhealthy. Conversations were guarded, and open discussion of academic matters was systematically discouraged. Committees were restructured so at no time were the professionals, as a group, convened to discuss academic issues. The administration had used its power to remove open opposition or even discussion. Membership on committees was generally hand-picked by the administration. There was a process for nominations, but the general view was those who served were aligned with the administration and hence did not represent the voice of coworkers. Suspicion of motives prevailed.

In the spring of 2005, the tension reached a breaking point. An anonymous letter appeared in a well-read student newspaper on campus. The authors made a number of serious accusations against the administration of their sector. In essence, if the accusations were proven to be true, the letter provided insight into an abusive working environment for faculty members. It was a cry for help from individuals who found themselves in a situation they were unable to resolve.

Anne L. Jefferson is Professor of Educational Organizational Studies at the University of Ottawa, Canada.

The administrators named in the publication did not respond to the letter. Instead, the senior administration of the institution responded on their behalf.

The response was quick and carried definitive sanctions. The editors of the newspaper were "persuaded" to publish an apology for the publication of the letter. The top senior executive of the institution wrote a letter to faculty members making it very clear that such a letter was not acceptable. Internal to the sector, a divisive campaign was started by a combination of current and former administrators whereby the division of faculty members into "us" and "them" camps was clearly developing. The senior support staff of the named administrators also joined in.

Instead of taking steps to bring this movement to a stop, the administration took a sideline seat and encouraged it, for example, with public emails thanking individuals for their support. No attempt was made by the administration to directly address the content of the published letter. Their silence was effective in shifting the focus away from the alleged abusive and bullying behavior suffered by the authors of the published letter.

The individuals in support of the administration were, for the most part, silent on the specifics of the alleged abuse. Instead, the focus was on the anonymity of the published letter. The claim of outrage appeared to settle on the issue that anonymity was not fair to the administrators as they were placed in a position of not being able to respond in kind. Ironically, anonymity was upheld with much righteousness by administration when claims were made against faculty members by students. The basis for their position was the power differential between the two parties. However, the same reasoning was refuted later by the administration with regard to faculty members and administrators even though the power differential paralleled that of the student/faculty situation. Moreover, in some ways, one might argue that the possible consequences for the faculty member were much more severe.

An extraordinary meeting of all faculty members was called with no identified agenda. Inquiries as to the matter to be discussed at the meeting were not addressed. Attendance was less than membership within the sector would have dictated. It was clear faculty members wanted to distance themselves. The administrator used the meeting to announce no resignations were forthcoming by the administrators, and a legal action was intended against the authors of the published letter. When questioned whom they intended to sue given the unknown identity of the authors and the student newspaper's apology for publication of the letter, the administrator quickly backpedaled, stating the matter was in hands of a third party. The meeting agenda was apparently completed; however, the administrator waited (with the faculty in attendance wondering why). Finally, one individual who had expressed concern about the anonymity of the letter spoke. The administrator showed visible signs of relief and pleasure. It would appear that what was wanted was finally happening. The individual spoke in terms of writing a letter in support of the administration. One or two other individuals who held administrative roles in the sector spoke in support of this action. In response, another faculty member cautioned faculty not to join a witch hunt with administrators; rather, collegiality among faculty members needed to be maintained. This remark was not welcomed by the administrator, and the meeting was brought to a close.

The campaign to write a letter and secure multiple faculty signatures began. The pressure to sign was very strong. The union was

placed in a position of reminding faculty members that they had a choice and they should not be made to feel their position was in danger if they did not sign. A letter was drafted without input from faculty members, other than those who campaigned for the initial need of a letter. The letter's content was questioned by at least one faculty member who requested an opportunity to discuss the content, but the request was not honored. The letter was forwarded to the senior administration of the institution, the named administrators, and the editor of the student newspaper.

The distribution of the letter to the named administrators effectively created a hit list. All faculty members who did not sign were now faculty members to be dealt with by the administration. Given that the signed letter initially had not been made public to all faculty members (nor to the union), there was suspicion among faculty members as to which camp colleagues belonged to, and, under these conditions, there was no neutral camp. The letter ensured that administrative practice would continue without further public challenge or attempts at investigation.

If faculty members had not received this message, then the subsequent actions of the senior administration ensured that it was heard. In the fall of 2005, senior administration made public via an email to the administrator of the sector, with instructions to transmit the message to all teaching and administrative personnel of the sector, the discipline of two faculty members who were identified by name. It was widely suspected that these individuals were the authors of the published letter, although nothing was known for sure. Even the senior administrator could not demonstrate with any certainty the authorship of the published letter. The email did not contribute to the maintenance of a safe and healthy work environment or promote collegiality. Rather, an abusive and intimidating exercise of power was occurring.

The Aftermath

The practice, or at least the perceived practice, of abusive administration is destructive on many levels. The organization cannot move forward in an energetic, progressive manner. Instead, it moves in a jagged manner which discourages the full commitment of other parties to its goals and objectives. The manner in which the internal function of an organization is handled is but a mirror of how it will deal with its external components. At the individual level, professionals will only tolerate the dismantling of professionalization for so long before fighting back. When the backlash occurs, the casualties will be numerous. Collegiality is reduced to groupings with restricted entry. Professional productivity is minimized as a result of physical and mental battle fatigue.