

MIDSTATE UNIVERSITY BUSINESS SCHOOL¹

Midstate University was the largest public university in its state, and its George Strupp School of Business Administration had long played a dominant role in producing Midstate's business and corporate leaders.

Professor Henry Manning had been Dean of the Strupp School for more than ten years. Professor Manning was a respected authority on production management in the state. He was also a genial, laissez-faire leader of the business school. Manning was generally liked and supported, particularly by the senior faculty, who played a dominant role in the School's decision-making. In effect, Dean Manning's style had created a vacuum that the senior faculty filled. There were jokes among the faculty that the Dean had trouble deciding what to wear in the morning without consulting the senior faculty.

As Manning reached retirement age, most of the faculty felt that change was long overdue. It was widely believed that the curriculum had stagnated and there had been no significant new faculty appointments in several years. The faculty also recognized that leaders of the Midstate business community were increasingly concerned that the School was losing ground and jeopardizing its leadership role in the state. Support from the business community was particularly critical at a time when the state was experiencing serious fiscal problems. In each of the two previous years, the state legislature had voted significant reductions in support for the University.

Even though the Strupp school was in a relatively strong position by comparison to many other units on the Midstate campus, the School had just suffered its first budget decline in more than two decades. Some faculty felt that the financial pressures were exacerbating old conflicts among vested interests and "competing theologies" in the senior faculty. Many faculty at every level felt that conflict among the full professors increasingly impeded that group's ability to exercise leadership for the School.

A search committee was appointed by Allen Jenkins, the President of Midstate, and charged to conduct a national search for a new Dean. The committee was dominated by senior faculty of the Strupp School and a few powerful corporate executives. The search committee agreed early on that they wanted an aggressive and creative leader with two primary qualities: strong academic credentials from one of the top national business schools, and the ability to work effectively with leaders of the Midstate business community.

After an extensive search, Professor James Benvenuto was invited to visit the campus. Benvenuto, 42 years old, was a professor of finance at a school that regularly appeared on lists of the top American business schools. He brought a strong record of research and writing, a reputation as an exciting and gifted teacher, and high levels of energy. Although he had no previous administrative experience, he had consulted extensively with firms in multiple industries. In person, he was articulate, witty and refreshingly outspoken. The search committee was convinced that he was the breath of fresh air that the school needed.

Over a period of several days, Benvenuto met with President Jenkins, the search committee, and most of the business faculty. He discussed his ideas for revitalizing the business school curriculum, and was very encouraged by the support he received.

Shortly after the visit, the Search Committee voted unanimously to invite Professor Benvenuto to become the new dean, and the choice was quickly endorsed by President Jenkins and the University's Board of Trustees.

Benvenuto Begins as Dean

Benvenuto moved to the Midstate campus and took office on July 1. Shortly after his arrival, he was interviewed by a reporter from the local paper. The following quotation was prominent in the published story:

I think most of the faculty recognize that the School has been in a holding pattern in recent years, and that there's a need for substantial revision in curriculum and teaching. I think there are two changes that are particularly needed. We have to develop a systematic approach to evaluating teaching. It needs to include student evaluations, and we have to build that into our promotion and review process. Second, we need to begin to reallocate our increasingly scarce faculty resources. For example, we're weak in the quantitative area, and we don't have anyone who's really on the cutting edge of new developments in information technology. On the other hand, we have too many faculty in some areas where students just aren't taking courses.

Within hours after publication, the Benvenuto interview became the dominant topic of conversation among the faculty of the Strupp School. Opinions were divided: many of the younger faculty cheered Benvenuto for openly discussing some of the key issues, but the majority of the senior faculty were negative. The following lunch-time conversation among three of the most senior full professors was typical:

Professor A: Who does this guy think he is? The Messiah of the Strupp School? He talks like we're some jerk-water outfit, and he's riding in on his white horse to save us.

Professor B: Well, I was on the Search Committee. It did surprise me that he wasn't more circumspect with the press. He should have consulted with some of the faculty before making a statement like that.

Professor C: Do you suppose he just doesn't understand how we do things around here? What if we go and tell him that's not how the School works?

Professor A: He already said we're too conservative. He may just think we're trying to undermine him before he even gets started.

There was much debate in offices, hallways, and washrooms, but none of the faculty felt that it was appropriate to confront the issue head on with the new dean. A few made joking references to the interview, and Benvenuto responded in kind. One or two people tried to suggest diplomatically that he might have ruffled some feathers. Benvenuto was puzzled by these reports, since all of his encounters with individual faculty members were quite pleasant and amicable.

Seeing no signs of serious opposition, Benvenuto decided to move forward by creating a new Committee on Curriculum and Teaching, to discuss ways to move forward on the initiatives that he was proposing. He appointed a committee with a mix of senior and junior faculty, and representation from each of the major departments in the school. All of the appointees expressed interest and enthusiasm about proceeding on the assignment. As chair, he appointed Professor Richard Sanders, a senior faculty member who specialized in human resource management. Sanders had been a member of the search committee that brought Benvenuto to the Strupp School, and was viewed by Benvenuto as a moderate who was broadly credible with the faculty.

Benvenuto attended the opening meeting of the committee to discuss his aspirations for its work, and to express his availability to help in whatever way he could. He suggested that the committee develop a preliminary report by the end of the Fall semester, and everyone agreed.

During the Fall, Benvenuto met periodically with Professor Sanders to inquire about progress. Each time Sanders said that the committee was running into a larger number of obstacles than anticipated, but that the work was moving ahead.

The deadline for the preliminary report came and went, and Dean Benvenuto heard nothing. A call to Sanders elicited only what Benvenuto had heard before: there were more difficulties than expected, but Sanders was still optimistic.

Frustrated, the Dean called Anne Jacobs, an assistant professor of marketing, and possibly the brightest and most creative person on the committee. Benvenuto was stunned when Jacobs told him, "I might as well be honest, Jim. I think the senior faculty is sandbagging you. They're leading you down the primrose path, and laughing among

themselves about how easy it's been. Before you came, they were running the school. They still are, and they don't want that to change."

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is *really* happening between Dean Benvenuto and the Strupp School faculty?
2. What should Benvenuto do now?

¹. This case was developed by Lee G. Bolman, Harvard Graduate School of Education, for the Institute for Educational Management. © 1988 by the author.