

CHICKEN, ANYONE?

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The meeting dragged on interminably. The issue the department had to deal with this time was workload. Who should do what? How many courses constituted a full load? How could the motley collection of frustrated faculty members maintain some sense of equity, keep the administration happy, and persuade the state of Ohio that professors were making good use of their time? Needless to say, it was a no-win situation.

Peter Jeffers, a tall, gangly Eastern European specialist with thick, horn-rimmed glasses that invariably slid down his nose, was getting agitated. He was used to teaching a 2-2 load – two courses per semester – and wasn't likely to have his own assignment increased. But now he seemed to be going out of his way to mandate that less fortunate colleagues might have to teach more to keep the Provost happy.

“Quality counts,” he proclaimed self-righteously. “If you're not being productive, you shouldn't be rewarded with a lighter teaching load.” That although he hadn't produced a significant work of scholarship himself for the past ten years. “There are people in this department,” he went on, “who are piggybacking on what the rest of us are doing, and it's just not fair. Their lackadaisical laziness is going to ruin it for us all.”

An audible gasp broke the silence in the room. The department had functioned reasonably amicably so far. By and large, people had gotten along with one another, even if they weren't always close. Now Jeffers, with his overinflated sense of self-esteem, threatened to disrupt what seemed like an increasingly fragile sense of harmony. Worst of all, he seemed to be sticking his nose into other people's business, speaking impulsively without any sense of what his colleagues were doing and without any awareness of the impact his comments could have on their lives.

Then, from the corner of the room near the bookcase, Jim Kline spoke up. His rural roots led him to remain largely silent, but every once in a while he managed to make his voice heard in a way that captured the essence of an argument. Raised on an Idaho farm and fond of a barnyard vernacular, he helped other members of the department retain a sense of perspective. Clearing his throat, he said, “Back where I come from, we always said, ‘If it's not your chicken, don't fuck it.’”

The workload issue refused to go away. Everyone recognized that further conversations were going to be necessary. But now they were inevitably framed by the metaphor of the chicken that ended conversation at the last meeting.

Meanwhile, as the national – like the international – economy went into a tailspin, conditions in the university went from bad to worse. As the governor cut aid to the public system of higher education, and to individual campuses around the state, most institutions tried to make up for the shortfall by increasing tuition. The state torpedoed that response. First the chancellor of higher education capped tuition increases, then eliminated increases altogether, in an effort to appeal to voters primed by political rhetoric to cut costs and reduce taxes wherever they could. Many of the schools in the state system found themselves running a deficit, which they managed to cover for a time with stock-market gains. After the market tanked, they discovered they were in even deeper trouble.

The ensuing discussion about what to do brought out the worst in the faculty. The department had only recently managed to overcome a particularly prickly personnel problem, brought on when Reginald Hawk, an English historian and a Brit to boot, found himself in something of a pickle. His wife Priscilla, unhappy in the United States after the death of her mother back home, decided to return to the United Kingdom, and informed her hapless husband he could return if he wished, but if not, the marriage was over. Worried about the potential demise of his personal life, he reached an agreement with the Dean that allowed him to teach four courses each fall term, and retain his full salary for the entire year. That arrangement allowed him to return to England for nine months at a stretch, remain solvent, and keep his marriage intact. The whole procedure would be reviewed in a year's time, and rejected if it wasn't working. But when the time came for such a review, and it turned out negative, Hawk threw such a hissy fit that the spineless Dean reluctantly allowed the arrangement to continue.

Hawk's insidious arrangement managed to disrupt the life of the department and the university as a whole. Colleagues felt, quite rightly, that they were being gouged and complained about the obvious inequity. Unhappy at what he had done, but unsure what more he could do, the Dean did nothing. Finally, after three difficult years, Hawk gave up the ghost and went back to England full-time.

The Provost, pleased at the ultimate outcome, dampened the sense of euphoria with his pronouncement of the theory of the rising assholes. “Every time you get rid of one asshole,” he declared, “someone will rise to the surface to take his place.” And so it was during hard times.

With the economy in the doldrums and the university barely solvent, the department had to respond to the Provost’s charge to find a solution to the economic problems. Plan how you might cut the budget, he said, in increments of 5 percent, 7 percent, and 10 percent. Nothing was to be considered sacred. The administration would follow whichever pattern seemed most appropriate to deal with the miserable conditions at hand.

Most members of the department tried to be reasonable. Well aware that temporary appointees were most vulnerable and that untenured junior colleagues came next, they sought ways to save money to keep as many as possible on board. But Jeffers, and his friend Matilda Meyer, had their own plans. Without paying attention to the personal consequences of cuts for others, they hoped to gain credit by directing the process on their own. Jeffers seemed to have an agenda that featured him as a knight in shining armor, a *deus ex machine*, if you will, able to find a solution to a fundamentally insoluble problem. Meyer, who reminded some colleagues of a wiry worm, urged him on, hoping to share credit for any solution. Jeffers was relentless, singularly oblivious to the fact that, after the last meeting, most of his colleagues now viewed him as a chicken molester rather than a shining knight.

“I have a solution,” he proclaimed, at a meeting in which the university President solicited faculty views. “Get rid of the football team.” Some colleagues agreed in principle, though they recognized that realistically such a step was not even a remote possibility. But Jeffers wasn’t done yet. “This whole damn process reminds me of the Stalinization of the Eastern bloc after World War II,” he declared. “We should resist!” When no one else but the hapless Meyer seemed sympathetic to his suggestion, he retreated into a corner, and for a while, at least, remained silent.

Coffee room conversations focused on the increasingly prickly state of affairs. Junior colleagues were scared. Visiting assistant professors were terrified, for they served on a year to year basis, and could be terminated at any time. But tenure-track faculty members who had not yet achieved tenure were likewise at risk. Despite the implicit assumption at the time of hire that they would be secure if they did good work, they would clearly find themselves the first to go if

the crisis got much worse. “What do you think is the worst case scenario?” one wanted to know. “When do you think we’ll have a better idea of what’s going to be done?”

Senior colleagues tried to reassure their juniors. “We’ve been through hard times before,” Arthur Wilson said. “We’ll manage to survive this.” Others offered similar comfort: “You’re the hope of the future,” Roz Pinkerton told a young colleague on the brink of tenure. “You’ll be OK.”

Only Jeffers and Meyer went out of their way to sound the alarm. “This is different from other crises,” Jeffers insisted. “We’re not going to survive it without stringent measures. Some people will suffer, to be sure. But this is necessary for the good of the whole.”

“Right on,” Meyer agreed.

Jeffers found himself marginalized as more and more colleagues wondered how he had wandered so far off base. John Parker, a senior scholar, ruminated on the academic world as he puffed on a cigarette. “I once received a letter of recommendation,” he reflected, “that read, ‘In a profession made up largely of boors and schmucks, the candidate under consideration stood out as a real mensch.’ I believed it at the time. But maybe now the boors and schmucks are taking over.”

Younger members of the department talked among themselves in an effort to feel better about a situation that seemed to be getting worse all the time. They spent endless hours reflecting about Jeffers, and then turning to Meyer, trying to understand what had led people they had viewed with a sense of respect, possibly even affection, to go off the deep end. Try as they might, they couldn’t find an answer that satisfied them. In frustration, they resorted to speculation about which wild animals their two crazy colleagues most closely resembled.

Meyer was easy. “Insidious like a snake,” Sadie Spring said.

Jeffers elicited more extensive conversation. “He looks to me like an ostrich,” one colleague said. “He always seems to have his neck in the sand.”

“I think he’s more like a giraffe,” another replied. “Stiff necked in the extreme.”

“No, not really,” another said. “He’s obtuse, like an elephant,” oblivious to the fact that elephants, social creatures to a fault, were hardly obtuse at all.

But Stuart Chapman, just tenured himself, and therefore ostensibly safe, had the final word. “I think he’s behaving like a baboon, causing mischief just to see what the rest of us will do.”

At long last, after endless hallway conversations, the department reconvened to talk about the crisis more formally. People were primed for the meeting, having rehearsed arguments with one another in the mail room. As the chair called the meeting to order, there was an uncomfortable silence, as if no one wanted to speak up.

Then Jeffers took the initiative. “I think we need to understand that this is like no other situation we’ve ever seen. We can’t simply stand back and let matters take their course. We’ve got to take decisive action.”

No one was quite sure what he meant.

Slowly, other members of the department joined the argument. Perhaps some of them could teach more, if that would preserve the jobs of younger folks. Perhaps class size could be increased. Perhaps there might be collaborative ways of serving larger numbers of students in ways that would satisfy the administration, without ruthless cuts.

“I’m not sure that any of those alternatives will work,” Meyer said, eager to make her voice heard, without offering any constructive ideas of her own.

At that juncture, Jeffers was determined to have the last word. “We all know that your proposed solutions are preposterous,” he said to his colleagues. “We’ve got to cut fat to the bone. We may not like it, but there’s nothing more to be done.”

“Don’t be a baboon,” Jim Kline said under his breath. A few members of the department gasped. Kline, in the entire time they had known him, had never confronted another colleague head on.

But his comment liberated others to speak out. Murmurs of “Elephant,” “Ostrich,” and “Snake” reverberated around the room.

Jeffers had clearly gone too far.

Struggling to maintain order, the chair called for quiet, but the murmuring continued. Finally, from the back of the room came the voice of Melanie Harper, a normally silent new hire, asking people to back away from meddling clumsily in issues if they weren’t personally involved.

“I’ve always thought,” she said quietly, speaking for everyone while echoing the comment Jim Kline had made weeks before, “If it’s not your chicken, don’t fuck it.”