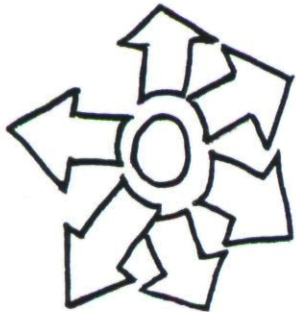


THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY: ADMINISTRATORS I HAVE KNOWN

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Among the challenges faced by administrators is becoming an effective manager of the people they oversee. In this narrative, one individual's experiences with administrators on several different college campuses is discussed.



I will grant you that my administrative experience is limited. Still, it doesn't always "take one to know one," and, as any Catholic priest who has conducted marriage counseling will attest, you don't necessarily need direct knowledge to know what makes for a good experience.

As a faculty member, I've worked with administrators (at all levels) at several different universities. Most of these individuals are bright, hardworking, well-intentioned folk, doing the best job they can under trying circumstances, with limited resources. A few are true geniuses, with a gift both for administration and managing people. One in a million is the personification of the devil. What follows is the story of one wonderful administrator, one scoundrel, one bully...and the beleaguered faculty member who toiled under them all.

The Good

My favorite administrator was also the first administrator with whom I worked. Jack (all names in this paper have been changed) is a bright, talented, kind-hearted man, frequently referred to by others as a visionary leader. One of the myriad traits that made him a great administrator was that there was nothing that Jack asked an employee to do that he would not willingly do himself. In fact, he often "pitched in" to do the scoutwork of the organization – everything from moving office furniture (including file cabinets), to arranging informational packets for a new student orientation. Jack was a *very* hard

worker, in every way. Always the first person to arrive at the office in the morning, he could also often be found "burning the midnight oil" late into the night. This meant that on the rare occasions when circumstances required that employees stay late, no one complained, because they knew that Jack consistently put in longer hours than they ever would.

Jack's management philosophy was simple: hire talented, competent employees, and then...let them be. He detested micromanagers and used to say that he hired people "smarter" than he was – a contention that is blatantly false. You don't rise to the level Jack has achieved without skill and smarts that surpass 90%+ of your peers.

Another feature that made Jack such a wonderful administrator was his management style. Jack took advantage of every opportunity to praise his employees, to "build them up," instead of tearing them down. He would occasionally drop by a faculty member's office, plop down in a chair, and tell the faculty person what a fabulous job she/he was doing. Not once did he drop by to chastise, or rebuke. In the three and one half years I worked with him, not once did I ever hear an unkind word come out of his mouth. Instead, he embodied B.F. Skinner's philosophy: "Catch 'em being good!"

Jack was supportive of his employees in many ways. He treated everyone with dignity and respect, and was invested in each individual's long term good. As one example, when I decided to enter a doctoral program that required a significant amount of time away

from the office, Jack was enthusiastically supportive. Not only did he allow me to take the time away, he wrote me a letter of recommendation, frequently asked how I was doing in the program, offered to help in any way he could, and – after he'd left to take a position at another University – continued to provide moral support throughout the duration of my program. He even sent reassuring, complimentary emails half way across the country while I anxiously awaited the results of my qualifying exam.

As Skinner would have predicted, Jack's style created an incredibly motivating environment, in which employees strove diligently to do their best, in order not to let Jack down. By treating people well, Jack engendered a loyalty among his employees that is unparalleled in my 30+ years of corporate and academic experience. His employees – current and former – love him. They don't "tolerate" him, or "like" him; they *love* him.

The Bad

I suppose, after working for this paragon of virtue, I was fated for a fall. Not many administrators could live up to the standard he set. Still, I never expected what came next. After all, I'd been treated fairly well by *all* of the administrators with whom I'd interacted over the years; each had valued my work, and been either positive or neutral in his/her interactions with me. So, to plummet from the zenith to the nadir of administrative experiences was outside the realm of my ken. Frankly, I was flabbergasted by what came next.

Oddly enough, it was Jack who encouraged me to take the position. Acting again in what he thought was my best interest, and knowing that tenure-track positions are few and far between, he wholeheartedly endorsed the idea that I leave my administrative position and take a faculty position at a smaller university. "But... it's in

Poupon," I said to him when the job offer was made. I was skeptical. Accepting the job would mean moving to an ugly area of the country. It also meant taking a significant pay cut. Still, the notion of finally being able to follow my dream of being a full-fledged faculty member was alluring, and after brief consideration, I made the decision to go.

The days were long and challenging, and my first year at Poupon U. was marked by 15 hour days. (Being given a schedule of classes that started at 8 a.m. and ended at 10 p.m. – a schedule I was given all but one of my semesters there – did much to keep me on campus.) Still, I was finally doing what I had labored many years to do, and, no stranger to hard work, I was content with my position.

Slowly, dissatisfaction began to creep in. It started with the management style of my new department chair, Professor Clueless. I'd heard that university faculties were "collegial;" that when reasonable people disagreed, decisions were "hashed out" in a communal process that, ideally, led to the "buy in" of everyone involved. Faculty sometimes publicly rail at the laboriousness of this process; to them I say try working under a regime in which that privilege is taken away.

Clueless' management style was the polar opposite of Jack's. Jack was hard-working; Clueless spent a good deal of time sitting outside, watching people go by. (Staff and students also reported that Clueless could be found playing solitaire on her computer, or sleeping in her office.) Jack had a collegial management style; Clueless was used to "top down," hierarchical management, and brought that model into the academy. Jack "pitched in" wherever he was needed; Clueless frequently sloughed her work off onto others. Jack was a "people person," always cognizant of others' feelings. Clueless appeared oblivious to the feelings of others: for example, imperiously "summoning" her faculty into the

department office, rather than asking them to stop by.

Clueless lacked a well-developed sense of decorum, and “professional” was the *last* word that anyone would have used to describe her. Instead, she was noted for her “adolescent” sense of humor, her boorishness, and her frequent absences from campus.

The Truly Ugly

But Clueless was a relatively *benign* poor administrator. The worst was yet to come. Dean Weed, Clueless’ boss, was a man of two faces: the “cheerleader” and the “bully.” The first nickname he’d earned from faculty in his college, because he had little of substance to say, so instead would repeat such vacuous phrases as, “We’re the biggest and bestest College in our school.” The second sobriquet, I came to learn through personal experience, was equally well deserved.

Weed was a man who did not like to be questioned. Even when the questioning was motivated by a sincere desire to understand, he took umbrage at anyone having the audacity to ask him a question. I remember distinctly the first time I asked Weed for clarification. It was during a faculty meeting, in which he had stated that the faculty handbook was to be used as a “guideline,” rather than a definitive source. There was one exception, he pointed out, and that was when the faculty handbook included explicit language about the faculty’s rights. In those cases, according to Weed, the handbook was authoritative.

Because we were discussing the election of a department chair, and because the wording in the faculty handbook on this topic could be interpreted in different ways, I asked whether, in this instance, the faculty handbook was to be considered a guideline or authoritative.

Weed raised his voice, and in a harsh tone, asked, “What part of the faculty handbook are you looking at?”

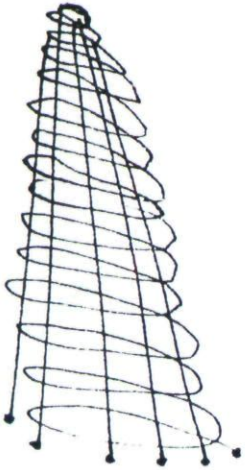
Unfamiliar with the tome, I muttered something about the section number and page I was reading. He interrupted, “There are two sections of the handbook. Which section are you in?” Before I could reply, he snarled, “I’m not going to sit here all morning and go through the handbook, page by page, with you,” then turned to recognize someone else.

As with so much other communication in life, it wasn’t so much *what* he said, as *the way* he said it. The meta-message was clear: “*Don’t mess with me!*”

Some months later, Dean Weed decided he wanted to remove one of the members of our Department’s retention, promotion, tenure (RPT) committee. Interestingly, his decision came shortly after the circulation of an email from this RPT member, supporting a department employee who had been let go. The Dean’s ostensible reason for removing this individual from the RPT committee was that the man was in violation of the University’s “nepotism” policy.

“How could that be?” several of the faculty wondered. The RTP committee member had been dating one of our faculty, but he had carefully recused himself from considering her file. As far as the faculty were concerned everything was completely “above board.” Still, Weed was adamant, so one faculty member went to the Provost to discuss the University’s nepotism policy. According to the Provost, Dean Weed had told him that our faculty member and the RTP committee member were living together; a statement that was patently untrue. After much discussion, the Provost agreed that the nepotism policy did not apply, and the composition of the RTP committee remained unchanged.

Shortly thereafter, Dean Weed came to a department faculty meeting, and announced that he would not “certify” (i.e., approve) our Department’s RTP committee for the



upcoming year. That's right – the same committee that had been constituted, and functioned smoothly, for the previous cycle.

Unfortunately, he informed the faculty of his decision only two weeks before the due date for several faculty members' files. Since ours was a new department, with no tenured faculty, this meant that the faculty had two weeks to recruit and elect willing faculty from *other departments* – no small feat, because the workload was tremendous, and the rewards small. Because the department had had great difficulty with recruitment for this committee in the past (a situation of which the Dean was aware), and because the faculty were happy with the committee as it had been constituted the previous year, I asked the Dean why this decision had been made. He refused to provide any rationale, except to say that the committee member who he had questioned earlier had acted unethically.

Given the difficulties the department had in recruiting members for the RTP committee in the past, and given the fact that there were only two weeks until RTP materials were due, I gently said that I would “contest” the decision, if there was any way to do so.

“You’re questioning my judgment,” the Dean said, in a cold, hard tone. “I’m not questioning your judgment,” I replied, “I’m disagreeing with your decision,” to which he reiterated, “You’re questioning my judgment.... *But you’ll have to rely on my judgment when I review your RTP file.*”

Har Megiddo

Months later, the time came for chair Clueless' regular performance review. Both faculty and students completed a survey and provided input. The results were daunting.

A majority of the department felt that Clueless' performance was below par. Faculty wrote that Clueless was a poor leader; that she behaved unprofessionally; and that she was away much of the time. Her disrespectful behavior was noted, as was her apparent lack

of knowledge about policies and procedures. Lack of trust and low morale were other factors that were mentioned. Students were more complimentary than faculty, but many of them also had remarkably unfavorable comments. Imagine, for example, reading that one student had ventured into the chair's office, only to be told to get the hell out.

Dean Weed responded to the negative review in his typical, bullying fashion. He called a special meeting of the faculty, and proceeded to berate the group for approximately half an hour. Not for a moment did he deign to consider that there might be an inkling of merit in the overwhelmingly negative evaluation. Instead, he chose to chastise the victims of the inept administration. The entire faculty were given a thorough “dressing down.” They were called “scurrilous,” “slanderers,” and “backstabbers” (among other choice epithets), and told that their “collective” decision in selecting a new chair – *whatever it might be* – would be unacceptable to the Dean. The only input Weed would consider was individual-level, attributable data – and you can just imagine how eager we were to talk to the Dean after his onslaught.

I have subsequently learned from others that Weed's “reign of terror” had been in existence for a long time. In fact, when one perfectly healthy colleague was sent to a psychologist for evaluation because he had gotten on Weed's “bad side,” several long-time, tenured, full professors at the University who provided support for that individual were unwilling to have their names included in the psychologist's report. They were happy to vouch for their colleague's good sense, but they didn't want the university administration to know their names. As one of the men said to the psychologist, “I'm not afraid of much, but I'm afraid of *him* (i.e., the Dean).”

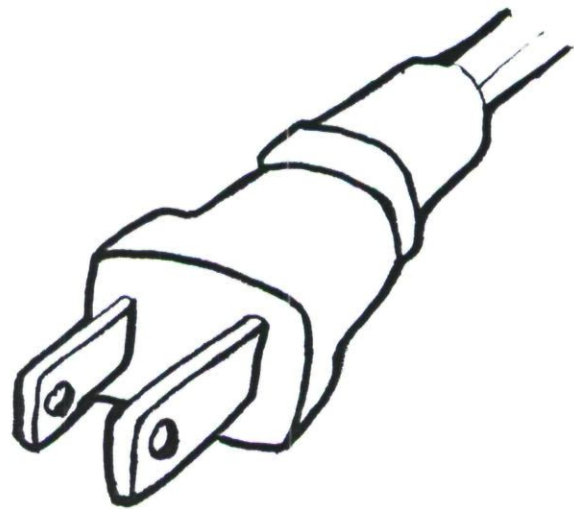
I wish I could tell you that the “powers that be” recognized some of the administrative problems at Poupon U...but that will take a

successful lawsuit, I fear. Department chair Clueless was “bumped upstairs” to a higher paying job that has less authority over faculty, but Dean Weed still terrorizes faculty on a regular basis.

As for me, the story has a happy ending. I escaped from Poupon U. to a challenging, upper-level administrative position at a university in the heart of the San Francisco bay area. There, I am privileged to work once again with superlative administrators, and I strive to emulate Jack’s style.

After working with some of the best – and worst – administrators in the academy, I’ve learned a little something about being a good administrator. It is vastly underrated hard work. Still, there’s a simple moral to my story. If you want to motivate your employees to do their best work – and have them think well of you forever – treat them with respect, work as hard as you can, and “catch ‘em being good”!

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