

Assignment #3: Group Critical Case Study

*Department Heads as Powerless Leaders*

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**Executive Summary of the Situation**

The teachers from the English department at Mariposa High School have built a reputation of being a challenging, but fair department. Many students have come to highly value what is being taught, and the preparation that they receive for post-secondary education. The school is part of the Durham District School Board and is located in an affluent community, where the parent population is incredibly involved, and it is not uncommon for teachers to be challenged on both content delivery and evaluation. The students are very devoted to their learning, and are involved in many activities outside of the class, including extra-curricular clubs and teams, as well as hobbies outside of school.

Mrs Smith is a department head in this English department, who leads her team to great success in content development, delivery, literature choices, determining department policies, and offering a great deal of support and mentorship for her teachers. She teaches a grade 10 academic English class, ENG2D. Mrs Smith goes above and beyond what is required of a department head. She often offers to purchase whole class sets of novels for each grade, writes the purchase orders, and stamps and numbers each novel after they arrive, before distributing them to the staff in her department. Mrs Smith listens to the suggestions of her peers for new and interesting ideas, encourages her teachers to collaborate, and encourages a focus on analysis and essay writing in academic-level courses, to ensure that students are prepared for post-secondary school. In this way, Mrs Smith shows characteristics of a participative leader as she provides a supportive environment and seeks to enact change through relationship formation and team-wide involvement (Winkler, 2010). She always involves teachers in her department by encouraging them to voice their opinions on improving the overall delivery of English courses at the school.

Many unique teaching strategies are even shared on the bulletin board in the English department where Mrs Smith has her office.

While three of four grade 10 academic teachers at Mariposa High School are consistent in their content coverage and evaluations, Ms Jones, an English teacher in Mrs Smith's department, is not. Ms Jones was once a department head at another school, and has been described as a teacher who often changes evaluations and content choices without consulting others in her department. For example, Ms Jones has chosen to replace essay writing in her grade 10 academic English class, with film reviews, so that her students can enjoy a movie every now and again in class, and has replaced a major written assignment with a board game task, allowing her students to be creative. Ms Jones' colleagues agree that she seems more focused on her ability to run extra-curricular activities, such as student council, prom and volleyball, than actually teaching the concepts that require more emphasis and time on planning and marking. While it is arguable that Ms Jones simply wants to offer a fun-filled curriculum to engage her students, or that she believes her class already has a thorough knowledge of essay writing, hostility and frustration is beginning to build within the department among the other teachers. Ms Jones feels that the choices she is making are decreasing boredom in her class, and that extra-curricular activities are the most important aspect in building positive rapport with students.

Mrs Smith has been observing the situation in Ms Jones' classroom with caution throughout the semester, but when she hears of another essay assignment being replaced with a second film review, she feels strongly that Ms Jones is not addressing the learning goals and curriculum expectations by not adequately preparing students for postsecondary studies and is creating unnecessary resentment and unease amongst her fellow teachers. Unfortunately, though

several teachers have openly expressed their frustrations, Mrs Smith knows that she is unable to take further action, as reporting these concerns to her administrative team could potentially create a major union issue (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, OSSTF), and Ms Jones is unwilling to recognize that she is causing issues in the ordinarily cohesive and collaborative department. Mrs Smith feels that she has no options in this extremely political situation and is unsure of her next steps.

### **Context**

In the past six years, Miss Shawny has worked in five different schools as a secondary English and History teacher. She is also a grade 10 English and History teacher at Mariposa High School. Miss Shawny has considered herself a transformational leader through activities such as collaborating on new projects and developing content with her colleagues, organizing extra-curriculars, and informally mentoring those who are new to the profession. She spends her lunch hours often conversing with new teachers in the English department on issues they are having and offers to proofread their report cards for them during report card time. Miss Shawny gives her own personalized report card comments to new teachers and works on building new comments with them. As a group, they all agree to the new individualized "next steps" comments for students with a percentage of 59% or less in English. Although she has yet to take on a formal leadership role, such as department head or administrator, Miss Shawny has found that department head position stands out as particularly challenging. She supports Mrs Smith's view on essay writing because she feels this an expectation that her students need to have mastered before graduating in grade 12.

While most leadership opportunities at the school level come with the ability to “manage”, a department head is asked to lead a group of teachers. However, as stated in the Collective Agreement (Durham District School Board, 2016), “[a] teacher appointed as a department head shall not be considered a ‘Supervisor’ under the Occupational Health and Safety Act” (p. 58). The department head holds no real authoritative power, and teachers, though encouraged to follow their lead, cannot be reprimanded for choosing not to do as they instruct. Furthermore, when observing poor behavior in teachers, department heads are often unable to report these issues to their administrators due to union protocols (OSSTF), even if the behavior or issue challenges the department’s integrity and professionalism. So, what can the department head do to ensure the department runs effectively and in the best interest of the students?

### **People and Organization**

According to the policies of the DDSB, a department head has four key roles: school wide leadership, curriculum leadership, teacher mentorship and department management (Durham District School Board, 2011). Despite their role in all of these areas, there is little policy written on how a department head should proceed when they are unable to fulfill their role as a “manager” or “leader”. Currently, Miss. Shawny has the strongest department head, Mrs. Smith, she has ever worked with and considers her department as a whole to be engaged, positive and highly efficient. She sees Mrs Smith’s English department newsletter emails on a weekly basis and often hears other staff members from other departments talk about Mrs Smith’s initiatives and how innovative they are. Parents are often seen coming to the office and praising Mrs Smith’s efforts on providing their adolescents with a great learning experience. Parents say that their son/daughter also enjoy Mrs Smith’s extra help sessions after school on Tuesdays.

These sessions turn out to be writing labs for essay writing students from all grades.

Approximately, a dozen students show up after school on Tuesdays to these sessions.

As a secondary English and History teacher in the DDSB, Miss Shawny considers herself fortunate to work in a neighbourhood where many of the students continue on to postsecondary education and value learning. Miss Shawny is also grateful to have a department head who leads the department to great success in both content and literature choices, collaboration in determining department policies and the overall level of support and mentorship for teachers.

The department head, Mrs Smith, is an active leader as she has led the department in choosing content and developing course policies, the development of a learning skills continuum, and in creating an effective and collaborative working environment. Mrs Smith has twelve years of teaching experience, and has been the department head for the English department at Mariposa High School for the past five years. Not only does she have the experience, but also the passion, to lead the team and run a successful department. Mrs Smith values the input from her team and wants to create a department that runs smoothly and most effectively for the students. Unfortunately, Mrs Smith feels powerless and discouraged in her role because of Ms Jones' actions and lack of collaboration with the team.

In addition, the teachers of the department, including Miss Shawny, are involved, as these individuals should be collaborating on the selected course material, following course outlines and the learning skills continuum, and contributing to this collaborative working environment. While most teachers are eager to follow the department head's lead, Ms Jones has chosen to disregard the established content and policies, and has essentially established herself as a non-team-player. These decisions have created hostility and frustration between colleagues in an

otherwise positive and professional environment, and Ms Jones, who is not following department protocol, has isolated herself from her colleagues. This friction restricts the entire team from being productive because it brings the overall morale down and makes the other teachers feel uncomfortable.

Finally, the students who are in Ms Jones' class are indirectly involved in this situation as they are not being prepared the same way as their peers in other classes. Previous experience in Miss Shawny's other school appointments has shown that when a teacher refuses to teach students what they need for success in future studies, the students find themselves unequipped and underprepared, creating stress and anxiety. This often results in the students having an increased workload in future studies to try to keep up with their peers. Ultimately, it is the goal of teachers to put students' success first, so when this is not being achieved, the students struggle with their studies.

### **Problem and Solutions**

First and foremost, we must attempt to understand the motivations of the individual teacher, Ms Jones, to explain why she is not following her leader, Mrs Smith. As discussed by McLaren (2013), people often feel as though they do not need a leader because they are capable of making their own decisions and can motivate themselves. A decision, therefore, must be made in terms of how this individual can be encouraged to recognize this leadership, and begin valuing the goals of the department.

The education landscape is a very complex one that can be complicated further with vague roles and responsibilities for department heads. When an issue arises within a certain department, the responsibility and power of the department head is front and centre. According

to the micro-politics approach to leadership, power and leadership are synonymous. The role of a department head is hard to define as it is usually associated with the structural characteristics of a specific school board (Paranosic & Riveros, 2017). While it is a self-centered model of leadership, and criticisms suggest that power can be abused, it is difficult to lead a group of people who recognize the lack of authoritative power, unless their utmost respect is directed towards the leader (Winkler, 2010). In terms of leadership theories, this problem fits within the situational leadership theory which indicates that a leader will adapt their leadership style based on the situation presented (Amanchukwu, Stanley, & Ololube, 2015). However, when a leader is rendered powerless by organizational restrictions, they are often unable to adapt their leadership style. Mrs Smith sees the problem, but is unable to address it for fear of retribution or discipline.

Initially, the department head spoke with the individual staff member regarding teaching a different skillset from the rest of the grade ten team. This approach represents a bureaucratic leadership style (Amanchukwu et al., 2015), that compliments her participative leadership style, by trying to ensure that all grade 10 team members are following procedures and policies precisely. While this leadership style is effective in environments where staff follow routine tasks, it is rather ineffective in school-based environments where creativity, flexibility, and innovation are valued (Santrock, 2007).

This case study is a prime example of a situation that requires thoughtful leadership. However, the leadership potential of a department head is significantly limited due to teacher unions, board-specific expectations, and principals' perceptions about department head roles and responsibilities (Leithwood, 2016). Solutions to be explored are focused around relationship-building and fully understanding the situation at hand to approach this issue from a



variety of perspectives.

One approach that could be taken by the department head, Mrs Smith, is to focus on the relationship she has with this teacher. Transformational leaders motivate and inspire followers by helping group members see the importance in their role and performance (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Building a shared vision within the department would be an effective leadership practice in this scenario as motivating people by helping them identify with the task and the goal leads to strong and effective leadership (Bell, 2013). By taking an interest in the practice of the department as a whole through collaboration and co-creation of a department vision would encourage all teachers in the department to realize its shared vision (Leithwood, 2016). This approach would take time and would only be effective if there was department-wide investment in the betterment of the department and their teaching practice. This relates more to a relationship/transformational theory of leadership since the initial focus would be on fostering relationships first in order to increase motivation amongst staff members (Charry, 2016).

Another approach to this situation could be compromise. Perhaps the Mrs Smith is not seeing the whole picture and needs to consider solutions from an alternative perspective. Department heads are often seen as dynamic leaders because they have the pedagogical content knowledge required to impact teaching and learning. This kind of knowledge and understanding is not often held by school administration (Leithwood, 2016). However, in this case, have they taken the time to truly understand the situation? Drawing conclusions without fully understanding the situation can be very dangerous and lead to further dissent and a fractured department.

As stated previously, the role of department head does not allow an individual much

affordance when it comes to advising on teaching practice. Due to union constrictions, the department head is rendered relatively powerless when it comes to approaching another teacher about their teaching practice. Furthermore, being in the same union, the department head cannot violate Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation's (OSSTF) Professional Conduct Guidelines. These guidelines state, "[t]he member should endeavour to eliminate any behaviour that undermines the dignity or self-esteem of an individual, or which creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment" (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, 2017) thus rendering the department head unable to express concern about another teacher's practice.

Finally, the department head could strategically timetable the member for the following school year during the staffing process. For example, the department head could ensure that this member is placed in courses in which there is less emphasis on the literary essay, such as in grade nine or applied stream courses. This, however, should be a last resort as it is autocratic in nature, which can lead to the member feeling a great deal of resentment for being dealt with in this manner (Amanchukwu et al., 2015).

### **Closing**

Teaching is a profession which requires people to be team players, and in many respects, teachers should have the capabilities to self-regulate and manage themselves; however, leadership is required to ensure that a school operates seamlessly. Within these schools, there are typically several departments, which all need to run in an organized and successful fashion for the success of the students. Unfortunately, it takes just one individual to throw off the goals of these departments and challenge the integrity of a course, as has been outlined in Mariposa High School's English department and Ms. Jones. Without the ability to supervise and manage, a

department head is powerless to help correct this, and ultimately, it is the students who suffer.

### **Discussion and Reflection**

Mrs Smith considers Ms Jones' programming a new challenge for her leadership as a department head in her school. She wants to be assertive when dealing with her colleague and is researching the best way to approach her in a tactful way. As a participative leader, she is considering adding other activities such as board games and film reviews to her lunch hour GLEE club and wonders if this approach will appease her colleague. Mrs Smith is hoping to avoid further conflict with Ms Jones. Questions to ponder regarding this critical case study are the following:

1. How would you approach a colleague who goes against the policy of department?
2. Do you feel that department heads should have recourse to speak to administration when extreme conflict occurs?
3. Is a department head just a positional authority with no real power to effect change?
4. How could the department head role be redefined? (ex. more of an administrative role). What would the impact of this redefinition look like?
5. How could a participative department head most effectively lead if they don't have the administrative powers to modify staff behaviour?
6. What kind of teaching responsibility should a department head have? (The norm might be different for each board or school depending on the size of school).
7. Should a department head's role emphasize more on guidance and mentorship, or management and supervision?
8. Is the teachers federation the leader in this scenario? If so, how can the federation improve this situation for teaching teams and the department heads?
9. Do you believe Ms. Jones can be considered a leader at all?

### **Lessons Learned**

\_\_\_\_\_ Mrs Smith has had other difficult colleagues to deal with during her time as a department head at Mariposa High School, however, administration has intervened in the past situations at her school. Unfortunately, current administration are so busy hiring maternity leave teachers at

the moment due to two staff having babies soon and have not noticed the English teachers discord. For this reason Mrs Smith is frustrated with this situation in her department. But luckily her principal saw in her qualities that show her as a change agent and a leader on her staff. Working as a change agent or expert leader within her department by identifying best classroom practice and transferring it to support improvement in your department and in your students, being a mentor leader, developing with their staff exemplary curricula and teaching programmes must remain her primary goal (Hopkins, 2008).

This case study places emphasis on conflict among staff and makes one reflect on the fact that can a leader lead without authority. Topics encountered are how a department head at the secondary panel manages a department of various teachers who all have various strengths and weaknesses. A department head must use creative ways to ensure that the curriculum is being followed, while respecting teachers programming strategies. Finding a solution that makes all parties content in a department, is not always easy. A true participative leader will make the final decision, will include her peers in the decision-making process and will persist to find a solution that reaches a consensus among professionals. And as a great leader, Mother Teresa (date) once said, “You can do, what I cannot do. I can do what you cannot do. Together we can do great things.”

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