

TURNING A BLIND EYE: A FAILURE TO ADDRESS DYSFUNCTIONAL CULTURE

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Terry came to Southern Beach Technical College after extensive business experience. He was tasked with helping with some Human Resource issues in the department. If he had had any notion of how bad things were, he might have reconsidered.

While the case is primarily descriptive in nature, it is sure to provoke considerable discussion about what should or shouldn't have been done and what possible recourse could be had at this moment in time.

As a veteran of management with over 45 years of business experience, Terry had worked with many types of personalities, behaviors and situations. His years of experience had provided him with an extensive array of leadership and management skills. Yet despite his experience, Terry was astounded by the events of the past few weeks. As a seasoned leader, he was unsure how such dysfunctional behaviors could have developed or how the situation had escalated to this point. The actions and behaviors by two senior staff members were not only unethical but illegal yet seemed to be perfectly acceptable within the organization. He needed to act quickly and deliberately before this unprofessional behavior further affected the performance and morale of others around them. Terry was faced with a tremendous challenge - how to tackle the issue on all fronts and heal this divisive workforce.

THE ORGANIZATION

Southern Beach Technical College (SBTC) is an educational and training center for business, technical and medical profession students which provides education for entry into those prospective fields. The school is a public two-year college founded

in 1978, with the goal to combine traditional and innovative teaching techniques to prepare individuals for transition into professional careers. The college worked closely with regional employers, and emphasized hands-on, experiential learning focused on training students to meet those employer's needs.

SBTC started as a small, technical school to provide craftsmanship skills to enable young adults to enter the workforce, be competitive in a trade, and become self-reliant. Over the years its mission had grown to include professional training in a variety of business disciplines and was able to attract many students who were unable to attend major universities due to financial, personal or academic restrictions (see Mission Statement). The SBTC had a diverse student body with a large representation from minority populations. As the institution evolved, it began to develop a close relationship with local and regional minority community groups who saw the institution as a means of advancing economic mobility for all lower income individuals. Currently, SBTC served a broad base of the population and became more diverse in both its student body and in its faculty and staff serving the institution.

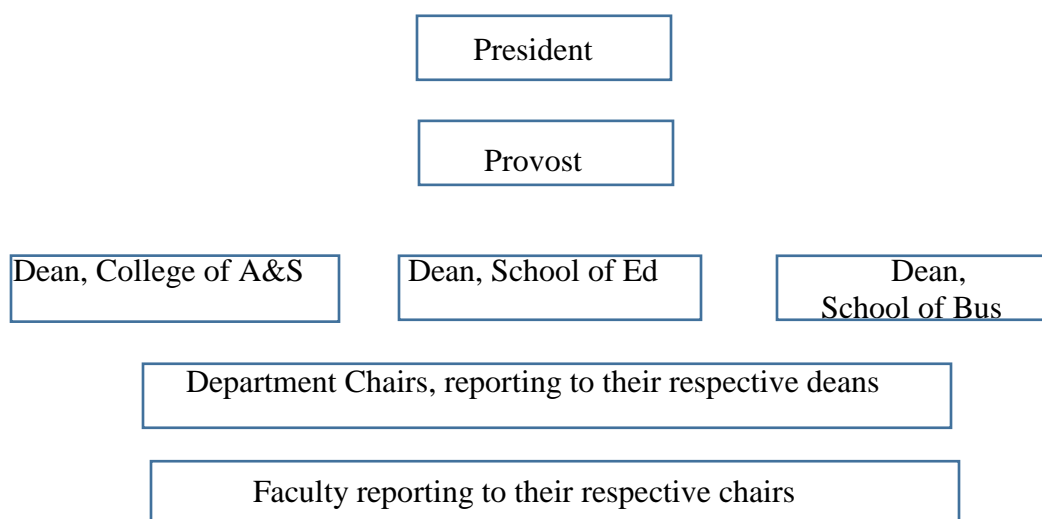
Mission Statement

The mission of Southern Beach Technical College is to provide innovative and technical education for a diverse student body and to provide its students with the skills and training necessary for employment at the entry level as professionals.

The New Position

As Terry had neared retirement, he began to think about how his years of experience could be shared as a legacy of his long career. He was both surprised and delighted when he was contacted by Sharon Jessup, the dean of the business program at SBTC, who made him aware of a leadership opportunity at the school. After lengthy discussions with Sharon, it became apparent that his academic and industrial background might make a significant contribution to the college by serving as a future Department Chair of the Management and Marketing Department within the School of Business.

EXHIBIT 1: Organizational Chart:



In their discussions, the dean described an array of challenges in this department that dated back many years. The department had 23 faculty members including representatives from seven different nations. Overall, the faculty could be described as having a rich racial and cultural mix. For the most part, faculty members were cordial and engaged with each other, but there were ongoing and long-standing disagreements between a few of the faculty that appeared to have racial undertones. It was also evident that there was an underlying set of problems that seemed to be culturally based. Terry had dealt with many human resource problems over the years, and based on his experience, he was convinced that sound leadership principles could resolve these issues. In addition to the personal conflicts, several faculty positions had remained vacant for more than two years, due partially to the faculty's inability to agree on the candidates that had applied. His experience in recruiting and hiring convinced him that this was not a significant problem, and he was sure he could help resolve these issues.

After meeting with the dean and the chairs of the other two business departments, Terry agreed to join the team, relying on his past experiences to get the department back on track. The plan was for him to come on board as an instructor for a semester or an academic year if necessary, so that he could develop a solid grasp of the issues and problems without the responsibility of leadership. The dean would then, with faculty approval, appoint him chair of the department for an extended period-of-time. Terry was not concerned about faculty rank of tenure as he only wanted a short-term position (3-5 years) and this unique kind of appointment with a termed position would save a tenure-track slot that was greatly needed to build the department.

THE FACULTY

There were several faculty members from the School of Business's Department of Management and Marketing that played a role in the unfolding of troubling events over several years.

Sharon: As Dean of the business program at SBTC, Sharon bore the ultimate responsibility for making sure all the departments within the business program were running smoothly. Sharon had served in administrative capacities in several educational institutions during her career. Friendly and outgoing, she was an experienced and competent leader with a vision for the program and a track record for working well with others.

Celeste: A senior, tenured female with a long history of incidents involving confrontations with other faculty members, students, and administrators. Many students and colleagues found her highly inflexible and disagreeable and anyone who stood up to her was accused of being either incompetent, wrong or racist. In addition, she openly expressed her views on race which were considered offensive by most of the faculty. This track record of disruptive behavior followed her from prior employment at similar academic institutions where she had failed to attain tenure.

Jamon: A junior, tenure-track faculty member assigned to entry level classes. He had been on the faculty for seven years but did not make tenure because of his modest publication record and the fact that his advanced degree was not recognized by the accrediting body of the school of business. Jamon was quiet and reserved yet had a good rapport with his students.

Barbara: A newly hired junior professor who had appropriate academic credentials for her position. She was somewhat challenged in developing her courses and had often sought assistance with her assignments. Barbara's insecurities with her teaching ability became evident with occasional displays of emotional outbursts. As time went on, she was often late for class and sometimes missed class entirely. Her students occasionally expressed concern regarding the continuity of her courses. It was very apparent that Barbara needed professional and personal guidance.

Samantha: A highly qualified junior faculty member initially hired as an instructor who was in-line for a tenure-track position when one opened. Samantha was an extraordinary classroom teacher and spent many hours working with students outside of the classroom. She was a strong tenure-track candidate with a few years

of college teaching experience and a doctoral degree from a highly-accredited university.

Ben: A tenured senior faculty member nearing retirement. Ben was occasionally challenged in the classroom by students concerned with his currency on the academic topics. Ben was a peacemaker and exuded a quiet competency. It was apparent that most faculty members respected Ben and he was a quieting force during contentious incidents during faculty meetings.

Karl: Karl was a tenured full professor who from time to time had difficult and harsh interactions with female and junior faculty. Karl often caused a stir among his colleagues because of his apparent lack of concern over the rigor of his classes and his unwillingness to put much effort into his course development and delivery. He had been an employee of SBTC for several years and seemed to have learned to work the system to insulate himself from repercussions. Karl was frequently absent from both classes and faculty meetings.

Julie: A junior tenure track faculty member who had recently graduated from one of the outstanding academic programs in her discipline. She was quickly the most popular faculty member and students could be seen lined up outside of her office door to spend a moment with her. She was very active in the professional organization of her discipline and quickly earned their top designation of professionalism. For many this designation takes several years of study. She completed the work and was designated in six months.

ESCALATING TENSIONS – CRITICAL INCIDENTS

Terry spent his first year in the classroom as an instructor and gained the support of most of the department faculty as a competent and knowledgeable classroom teacher. After he was hired, it quickly became apparent that it would take an academic year to begin to understand the multitude of faculty interactions he observed. A year later, Terry was officially promoted as the Chair of the Management and Marketing Department, where he observed several incidents involving Celeste and her colleagues over the next four years.

Celeste and Jamon

Jamon's relationship with Celeste was tenuous because of a long-standing dispute over her use of frequent comments related to Jamon's race. In one instance, several faculty members were witness to Jamon being heatedly accosted by Celeste in a faculty meeting because, in her words, "he was not acceptable because he was not racially diverse enough and had difficulty relating to the diverse students at the school." Following the incident, Celeste reiterated her thoughts by repeating her sentiments in writing through an e-mail sent to the entire business faculty.

This antagonistic relationship continued for several years and became an issue when Jamon applied for tenure. Jamon was ultimately denied tenure as he failed to meet the requirements for publishing research and his degree was not appropriate for this tenured position.¹ Jamon subsequently appealed his negative tenure decision and used the confrontations with Celeste as evidence of racial discrimination at the SBTC tenure review board hearing. His appeal was denied due to his lack of required qualifications, yet the administration of SBTC made no attempt to investigate his complaint regarding the racial discrimination charge. Frustrated with the lack of administrative concern, Jamon left SBTC at the end of the semester.

Celeste and Barbara

One evening, shortly after Terry became the department chair, he was working late and heard a disturbance in the hall, not far from his office. As he came into the hall, he saw Barbara walking away from an open classroom door. Celeste was speaking to her from that door, but Terry could not understand what was being said. Afterward, Terry got a lengthy email from Celeste charging Barbara with interrupting her class and creating an untenable situation by speaking to a student while class was in session. Terry spoke to Barbara who denied any classroom interruption and stated that she just returned a wave from a student in Celeste's class as she was walking by the open door. Barbara also told Terry that Celeste had stopped by her faculty office and told her to stay out of her (Celeste's) way in the future. Barbara told Terry that she was afraid to be in the same building with Celeste because of her anger and inappropriate behavior. The exchange of vitriolic emails between Barbara and Celeste went on for several weeks. Celeste continually complained to the dean's office over their refusal to take disciplinary action against Barbara. Terry conducted investigations which included conferences with students from the class period in question and found that Barbara's actions that evening did not suggest any type of inappropriate behavior. Celeste continued to express her disgust with Terry and Sharon for their failure to discipline Barbara.

Over the next six months, Barbara complained many times about the treatment she was getting from Celeste. Celeste deliberately refused to acknowledge Barbara by ignoring Barbara's presence in meetings, ignoring her questions or comments in the hall, and refusing to help Barbara with curriculum development. Celeste told

¹ Tenure: In certain academic institutions, professors/instructors can obtain tenure by satisfying certain academic and/or service requirements set by the institution and its accrediting bodies. Tenure provides an indefinite academic appointment was established to ensure academic freedom and can be terminated under certain extenuating circumstances. If a tenure-track employee does not meet the set requirements, they can be provided a limited contract or dismissed.

Terry that “Barbara should have never been hired and that she would do everything in her power to make sure she left SBTC.” Terry continued to request that Celeste work with Barbara to develop curriculum, yet Celeste would not comply. Terry discussed this situation on several occasions with Sharon, the dean. Sharon warned Celeste about the inappropriate behavior and suggested that a better solution might be to fulfill her senior faculty duties by being a mentor to Barbara. Sharon advised the college Provost of this incident, but no real action was taken. No longer able to deal with the situation, Barbara initiated legal proceedings for harassment and racial discrimination against SBTC and left the college at the end of the academic year.

Celeste and Samantha

Samantha was hired in the same year as Barbara and became a very popular faculty member with her students. She was active in the student professional organization and was very focused on developing her own professional career as an academic. Soon after Samantha joined the faculty, Celeste made it clear that she felt Samantha should be removed from the position as she (Celeste) believed Samantha’s Ph.D. was inappropriate for the discipline. This accusation was unfounded as Samantha’s degree was from a highly accredited school and was recognized by the college’s accrediting body. Samantha also had several current publications in top journals in their field of study while Celeste did not. This was of further irritation to Celeste and due to these sentiments, Celeste refused to acknowledge Samantha’s greetings in the hallway and made a point to ignore her in faculty meetings or social gatherings. Throughout Samantha’s time at the college, she also experienced several unpleasant encounters where Celeste stated that Samantha’s race and sexual orientation were other factors that made her unfit to teach at SBTC.

Samantha and Celeste were responsible for developing the curriculum for their specific discipline, so Samantha requested that they meet to begin working. Celeste informed Samantha that “there was no possible way that they could work together considering the huge difference in their academic backgrounds and experience.” Celeste also suggested that Samantha look for a new job because her tenure at SBTC would be short. Severely shaken by this interaction, Samantha requested Terry’s help. He met with Celeste and strongly suggested that she change her behavior with Samantha and reminded Celeste that mentoring junior faculty was expected of senior faculty members. Celeste insisted that she could not help a junior faculty member who did not have the appropriate academic credentials. Regardless of the proof of Samantha’s solid credentials, Celeste remained adamant in her unwillingness to cooperate with Samantha. Samantha merely commented to Terry “that if Samantha were of a different race that things might be different” and suggested that the students would be more responsive with a faculty member of a different race. The matter was turned over to the dean who made several attempts to meet with Celeste, however Celeste failed to attend any of the confirmed

meetings. Sharon subsequently submitted a formal complaint to the Provost regarding Celeste's series of unprofessional and illegal behaviors requesting disciplinary action. The Provost never responded.

Celeste's Promotion

As the spring semester evolved, Celeste applied to become a full professor. The department faculty committee declined to support the application, the department chair declined to support the application as did the dean². The college's committee on promotion and tenure declined their support and met in special session to create a strong document urging the provost to decline Celeste's application based on many incidents over the years in conjunction with her weak publication record. However, the provost approved Celeste's promotion to full professor despite the lack of support from any of the committees (department, school or college) involved in the tenure review process.

Immediately after the notice that Celeste had been promoted, Samantha submitted her resignation and filed a complaint of discrimination with the EEOC. In her letter of resignation, Samantha specifically stated that Celeste's behavior was the reason for her resignation and that the act of promoting Celeste despite her behavior was a clear indication that SBTC would not protect her (Samantha) from further discriminatory behavior on the campus. Terry and the dean proceeded to put together an extensive (150 page) document that included more than 30 specific incidents over a ten-year period supported by emails, statements from witnesses, minutes from faculty meetings, and notes from meetings with Celeste. They requested the provost take immediate action in discharging Celeste. The request resulted in a closed meeting with the faculty, provost and college president. Although the President assured the faculty that such behavior would never be tolerated at SBTC and that he would take corrective action, Celeste was not terminated, and no disciplinary actions were directed at Celeste. Morale amongst the management and marketing department was now at an all-time low.

One More Victim – Celeste and Julie

Terry was now in a bind. It was late in the spring semester, and with all the recent vacancies, he needed to hire faculty to cover the upcoming fall. He placed appropriate ads in the academic publications and had very poor response. A colleague at another school, informed him of a doctoral candidate, Julie who was highly recommended and had just entered the marketplace. Terry quickly created a faculty search committee together and invited Julie to interview. All three members

² The promotional process requires that the promotion application proceeds through a committee of tenured faculty, to the department chair, to the dean and then to the college promotion and tenure committee for final recommendation to the provost.

of the search committee were pleased with the interview and her classroom presentation was excellent. An offer was made, and Julie accepted the job.

Throughout the entire search process, Celeste, by her own choosing was not available for any kind of participation yet was livid when Julie was hired. Julie's credentials were impeccable, but Celeste was having none of that. The fact that students were pleased with Julie did not impress Celeste. Celeste ignored Julie in the hall, would not respond to greetings from Julie and let everyone know that Julie was only hired because of "Terry's discriminatory practice of only hiring the same type of candidates." Once again, Terry discussed Celeste's unprofessional behavior at length and indicated that her behavior was not only unacceptable but that it could lead to dismissal. Terry met with Sharon who requested a meeting with Celeste. When Celeste again refused to meet, Sharon notified the provost. Fed up with the constant complaints, the provost simply suggested that perhaps the issues continued because Sharon was incapable of managing the faculty. With no actions coming from the provost, Sharon decided to move Celeste to another building to limit the possibility of confrontational incidents. Celeste immediately accused Sharon of isolating her from the faculty and students and suggested that the move was discriminatory. Celeste remained in her new office for two years much to the relief of junior faculty and most senior faculty. Even with the new office assignment, the overall situation did not get better. During those two years Julie was regularly subjected to Celeste's unprofessional behavior when she was in the building for classes. Julie however was very strong-willed person and maintained her perspective for career development despite Celeste's actions.

THE DRAMA CONTINUES

Celeste eventually convinced the provost to have her office moved back to the business building. She continued her abusive behavior towards several junior faculty members and also began attacking senior faculty. Still upset with Ben for not supporting her application for promotion, she began verbally attacking him in faculty meetings and started harassing him on several issues via e-mail. She consistently accused Ben of siding with Terry "because he simply had a biased mindset and was unaware of what was needed for a minority student body." Celeste was also able to create a co-conspirator, Karl. She met often with Karl and was able to create an alliance where they would cover for one another as their attendance in classes and meetings began to dwindle. Celeste and Karl took every opportunity to challenge Terry's authority and decisions and worked to undermine efforts or changes proposed by other department members if they played no role in the process.

Celeste's professionalism continued to deteriorate. Celeste would be sick for extended periods of time during most semesters stating she had disabilities but

refused to provide any medical proof other than a blank doctor's note. When broached on the subject, Celeste made it clear to Terry that her disabilities were personal issues that did not need to be shared with a department chair. Terry reported this issue to the dean on multiple occasions but little ever came of these problems. She failed to hold class for over half of most semesters and student complaints increased. Terry submitted reports to HR but nothing was ever done by top administration. Terry and other faculty members often covered Celeste's classes when she was absent.

The situation came to a head after Celeste insisted on being part of the curriculum committee since she was a senior faculty member. However, she rarely attended mandatory committee meetings and would then dispute any decisions made without her. The tension escalated when the committee finalized their proposal for curriculum changes and brought it before the entire department faculty for a vote. Celeste was furious and requested the proposal be rejected and the curriculum committee be disbanded since she believed they collaborated behind her back in order to create inappropriate curriculum changes.

The matter was brought to the dean, Sharon, who again presented the provost evidence of Celeste's disruptive actions. The Provost called a meeting of the department. She announced that the long-standing racial and cultural problems in the department preceded the current dean and chair. The department was then directed to work together in developing a plan to resolve their differences. At the meeting called by the provost, it became apparent that Celeste had complained to the provost about departmental affairs and that Celeste had a unique pull with the provost. To keep the department moving forward, Terry put together a core set of ideas for addressing the curriculum and cultural problems and presented these in a series of faculty meetings. The concepts were well received and many faculty members were enthusiastic about the possibility of working out these over-riding issues. Celeste and Karl were absent from these mandatory meetings and it was clear their new coalition would be a barrier in moving forward.

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

Terry is faced with the escalating situation, and must decide what to do. Every direction seem filled with landmines.