BOWLING GREEN DAILY NEWS

Coffeemakers, subcommittees, and academic priorities…

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"The reason politics are so rampant in academia is because the stakes are so low."

You've probably heard that quote – or one of its many incarnations attributed to a variety of different individuals. Obviously, it's a put-down of higher education based on the completely bogus notion that those of us who inhabit a college campus don't have our priorities securely in order.

Well, I am here to put that ridiculous notion to bed by recounting an episode that should end this entire debate once and for all.

Please note that this little vignette is completely hypothetical and took place in a galaxy far, far away. The names have been changed to protect the guilty and any insinuation that it could have actually taken place is entirely warranted.

One afternoon, I was busy working tirelessly to end world hunger and cure cancer, which is how most professors spend their leisure time. Suddenly, my phone alerted me to an incoming text. Our department chair (academic-speak for boss) had called an emergency meeting.

As usual, I dropped my beaker and ran to the conference room, where I was met by my colleagues who were anxiously waiting to see where the fire had broken out this time. Our chair – who we will call Bill – was not in a good mood.

"Apparently, we have a freeloader, or perhaps several freeloaders in our midst," he said. "Someone, or several someone's, have been making coffee and not leaving the required 50 cents in the donation jar on the counter adjacent to the coffeemaker."

"If this continues, we may just have to stop making coffee altogether," he added poignantly.

I immediately understood the gravity of the situation. Without coffee, it would likely be impossible for our department to fulfill its noble and ongoing mission of ending all wars during our lifetime.

"How can this be I asked?" My colleagues had come to expect me to take the lead in these kinds of dire circumstances, and I did not want to let them down "We all know the rules."

"I don't know," Bill replied sheepishly. "But something has to be done quickly before everyone starts looking for jobs elsewhere."

I now felt the eyes of the department upon me. I knew if I didn't take the lead, we were all doomed.

But instead of pointing fingers (as I believed I knew who the culprit was), and initiating a time-consuming and potentially costly investigation, I decided to take a different approach.

"What we need," I said, "is a coffee machine policy, and perhaps a handbook." From my vantage point, this was the natural response. When faced with a problem, do the logical thing: form a committee.

I agreed to chair the newly formed coffee policy committee and asked for volunteers to head up each of the five subcommittees I figured it would take to make my vision a reality.

Once we were organized, the real work began. I charged each of the subcommittees with developing a preliminary draft covering their respective areas of responsibility within a month. Not much time, I know. But this was coffee we were talking about. Definitely an all-hands-on deck, make-or-break moment for our team.

Although our other responsibilities no doubt suffered immensely over those four long, arduous weeks, I felt we made real progress. That was apparent when each subcommittee gave their reports at the designed faculty meeting. The PowerPoints were enlightening, the spreadsheets were convincing, the policy recommendations were powerful.

We all agreed to hold a vote at our next meeting after the second reading and then finalize the reports for official submission to the other seventeen committees needed for approval, as stipulated in the faculty handbook.

In the meantime, we formed a steering committee to integrate the five subcommittee reports into a single document that would become the basis for our new coffee policy handbook.

Seeing the complexity of the task, I suggested we bring in an outside consultant who could offer a fresh perspective and make sure we were on the right track. After all, we only had PhDs in academic disciplines. We needed someone with real expertise in coffee policy.

Some of my more astute colleagues also saw a grant-writing opportunity embedded in our new policy, and perhaps a presentation or two at a few upcoming international conferences. Personally, I saw at least one book chapter coming out of the experience - maybe even an entire book at some point down the road.

The coffee policy handbook only took around eight months to finalize and enshrine into official institutional regulations. The appeals process took a while to clarify, and not everyone was on board with the proposed disciplinary action if someone didn't follow the policy, but eventually we came to consensus, and it was adopted.

After an additional two months, primarily needed to get the document in strict APA format and deal with some complex semi-colon issues, a formal vote was held and the policy was officially on the books.

That afternoon, we celebrated during happy hour at a local bar and reflected on our major accomplishment and how it had the potential to change the entire culture in our department.

Oh, and since the new coffee policy went into effect, no one has poured themselves a cup of coffee and not left the requisite 50 cents to make sure we can continue to have coffee in the future.

So take that all you armchair critics out there spreading those vicious lies about academics not having their priorities clearly in order and focused on things that matter. This little tale should shut you up once and for all.



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