

CCAS case study for inclusion in the Department Chairs Seminar

Faculty Member at a Crossroads

Chemistry Department Chair Al Kemmey looked in dismay at the annual report of Flo Reene, an Associate Professor in her third year at rank at Leading Research University, wondering how things had gone so badly amiss. Reene had been a rising star when his unit had hired her away from a competing institution six years ago. His department had been aggressive in their recruitment efforts, making a major investment not only in her salary and start-up package, but in creating a Lecturer position in the department for her husband, which was subsequently converted to tenure-track. Unfortunately for all involved, the husband had been unable to meet the department's research expectations, resulting in his termination two years ago. While he had readily secured another position in industry, doing so required a long-distance relocation, effectively placing Reene in the role of single mother to the couple's two young children. The challenges of a long-distance relationship had proven insurmountable, resulting in their divorce. The strain imposed by Reene's personal struggles had carried over to her professional role; her engagement in scholarly pursuits and professional service had all but ceased, and her instructional performance plummeted, as reflected in poor teaching evaluations and frequent student complaints. Her current annual report provided no evidence of improvement, and in fact, was so scant as to be unacceptable. Not helping matters was the state of Reene's relationships with her chemistry colleagues. While she had never disputed the appropriateness of the department's decision to terminate her spouse's employment, it seemed evident to Chair Kemmey that several of the senior faculty had distanced themselves from her after making the difficult personnel decision, segregating her within what had been a highly collegial unit. In that she was one of only two tenured female faculty members in the department - the other being a soon-to-retire full Professor - her isolation was very noticeable, particularly, Kemmey feared, to the two recently hired female Assistant Professors in the unit.

Kemmey pondered his options for addressing the situation. Failing to act seemed certain to result in the continued downward spiral and ostracism of a highly capable faculty member, someone who potentially had 20 years of employment ahead of her. While he was committed to seeking a better outcome, he was at a loss as to how to effect a turn-around. How should he proceed?

Questions:

1. What factors may be contributing to Reene's performance issues?
2. Are there issues besides those of Reene's performance that merit the chair's attention?
3. What are the likely costs of the chair's inattention to this situation?
4. What strategies do you suggest the chair undertake to address the situation?
5. Would your thoughts as to how to proceed differ if Reene was identified as African-American, and the only person of color in the unit? If so, how?

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