Reginald Murphy College Case Study: Gender Equity Issues

Background

Reginald Murphy College (RMC), located in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, enrolls 16,000 undergraduate and graduate students and employs just over 4,000 faculty and staff. At this competitive institution, renowned for a beautiful campus and exceptional facilities, the curriculum emphasizes the liberal arts. The college also offers a number of professional programs.

Among the distinctive features of RMC is the particular emphasis on creating a congenial and collaborative learning environment. The college explicitly recognizes the institution’s commitment to collaboration, collegiality and respect in its slogan “Reginald Murphy College... Where collaboration, collegiality and respect for others are core values.” The slogan is posted on the RMC website and in prominent locations in many buildings.

Consistent with these values, welcoming activities for students—and for faculty and staff—are extensive. The college has a number of residential learning communities where collaborative learning is emphasized. Within student affairs and campus life, the RMC ideals are also a conscious focus of attention.

Faculty “collegiality” is a familiar concept in describing ideals of faculty life, and “collaboration” is often mentioned in position descriptions for staff. Moreover, service to the RMC college community is a highly valued and recognized component of appointment and promotion reviews for all employees.

Your Challenge

You serve as vice president of administration and finance. Five associate vice presidents report directly to you and serve as members of your senior leadership team—Rich Jerow, Toni Brown, Jane Martinez, Marvin Rice, and Gerry Watson. Each associate vice president has from two to four directors reporting to them.

You’ve worked at RMC for 26 years, and you’ve never seriously considered leaving. You enjoy your job and the people you work with. Your leadership team, particularly, is a source of great pride and pleasure for you. You’ve worked to build a strong and collaborative team and have tried to encourage social bonding as well as collaborative work relationships among members of the group.
Creating a welcoming and respectful environment for all staff has always been a personal and professional goal for you, and you take pride in having achieved that climate in your administrative area. You make an effort to be explicit about your commitment to the institution’s core values, are confident that your views on this topic are well known to the five associate vice presidents and others in the division, and have a personal commitment to “walking the talk.”

Last week, one of the direct reports and a long-time friend, Gerry Watson, came to you to share parts of a conversation he had had over coffee with a highly regarded senior director who reports to a member the leadership team. Gerry tells you that the individual is a female and has worked in the division for less than five years, a profile which could describe a number of employees. He says he’ll refer to her by the fictitious name, “Jane” to honor her request for confidentiality.

Gerry explains that during the course of the conversation, Jane asked about the seriousness of the commitment to diversity issues especially as it relates to women within the Administration and Finance area.

Jane’s perception is that women in the Administration and Finance division are generally not treated in the same way as men in hiring and promotion decisions, or with regard to professional development, and she made reference to the departure of several women with great potential for more advanced positions elsewhere.

She explained that she also saw numerous gender inequities and insensitivities in day-to-day work practices such as a preoccupation with sports in the workplace. She referred to frequent conversations about the outcomes of sporting events, common use of sports analogies in meetings, the annual divisional softball game, and occasional afternoon golf outings, all of which are primarily “men’s events.” She also noted the fact that informal meetings are often scheduled before the beginning of the work day at times when women with families typically find it difficult to attend.

Jane also thinks that men speak considerably more and for longer periods of time in meetings than women, and she believes this is because men are more likely to be asked for their opinions and more likely to have their perspectives and suggestions taken seriously by senior leaders. Additionally, she commented on the nonverbal communication during meetings, sharing her observation that men, regardless of their roles, are far more likely to position themselves at the head of conference tables or in other positions of prominence in meetings.

The director’s view is that the marginalization of women she described is probably not intentional or conscious, but it’s troublesome nonetheless. She concluded her comments by noting how ironic it is that these problems would be prevalent at RMC and in this division given the ideals and philosophies of the institution and its leaders. For women, she said, “the rhetoric and reality simply don’t seem to match.”
Knowing your feelings about the importance of these topics, Gerry felt you would want him to share Jane’s concerns with you. You are stunned by what you hear. You ask Gerry for his take on the situation. He indicated that he hadn’t really thought previously about the issues the director had shared with him, but that she seemed very genuine and thoughtful in her comments. She obviously was frustrated, but seemed to be sharing her views more as observations on the contradictions she observed in the division than out of anger or personal resentment.

You thank him for the bringing these issues to your attention, and indicate that you need to give these concerns some thought.

Discussion

Take 30 minutes to prepare a plan for how best to address the issues that have been raised. As a group, consider what principles would guide your thinking - as an individual, as a member of the senior administration of the institution, and as the vice president of administration and finance. What do you see as the problem, or problems, here? What process should you follow in moving forward?

Assessment

Should you begin by gathering information to assess the accuracy of the perceptions, or take their accuracy as a given? If you decide to gather information for clarification or validation, how do proceed? Here are several options. Which seem most appropriate? What are the benefits and possible risks of this approach?

1. Do you have a follow-up discussion with Gerry after you’ve collected your thoughts?
2. Do you ask Gerry to urge the director to talk to you personally?
3. Do you talk with members of your leadership team about the allegations and core issues and values involved? If so, do you discuss the matter with the members individually or as a group, and how would you frame the discussion?

Thinking broadly about information gathering strategies, what are the benefits and risks of talking about this issue with either the director or others in the division?

Are there other options for clarifying or validating the issues? For instance, might you develop a strategy of consistent, carefully observation and analysis of conversations, meetings, and planning activities within the leadership team for a fixed period of time?

Action

After you assess the situation, how do you proceed? If you were to conclude that Jane’s perceptions are inaccurate or exaggerated, what strategy would you adopt? If you were to conclude the many of the issues were, in fact, valid, how would you proceed? What would be your short-term strategy and your longer-term approach?