
COMMITTEE WORK THAT WENT SOUR

I was appointed by my Department Chair to lead a committee that is charged to evaluate our programs related to recruitment of underrepresented minorities in medicine. Apparently this was a charge given to my Chair from the Dean. This is a high profile issue nationally and at our institution, so I am not surprised that the Dean wished to proactively address these issues. I, as a clinician-educator, find this type of committee work somewhat cumbersome but accepted the charge. After all, I am a good citizen and I believe in the overall goal of improving our diversity landscape. The committee's recommendations will have important implications for my own program. I wasn't sure, though, how I was going to juggle the committee report deadline that coincided with a manuscript deadline.

After finalizing the committee membership that included a balanced representation of both basic sciences and clinician faculty, I received a call from the Chair. "Could you please consider adding Alex Cunningham to the committee? I think Alex will be a valuable member." Not including Alex wasn't entirely an oversight on my part. It is well known that Alex is aggressive in meetings with tendencies to push his own agenda. It has been barely three months since the last interaction I had with Alex when I constantly felt challenged and undermined during a committee meeting. "I don't need a predictable naysayer on the committee who is going to drain my energy!" was my first thought. However, I know my Chair has a deep respect for Alex's research and national reputation. Instead of risking the appearance of not being a team player, I reluctantly agreed to invite Alex to the Committee. I sent Alex an invitation email and instructed my assistant to forward meeting dates to Alex.

During the subsequent months of chairing the committee, I was surprised at Alex's sparse attendance but figured it's her responsibility to keep up with the minutes. In a way, I was relieved not having to manage Alex in meetings as I find his attitude to be exhausting to handle. When he managed to attend the meetings, Alex only spoke up in opposition of ideas on the table and was mostly absorbed in his iPhone.

Yesterday during the committee meeting, the draft report was discussed for the last time before submitting it to the Department Chair. Alex became visibly upset and blurted out that the meeting was one of the worst consensus building process in recent memory. "I will not endorse this report until my opinions are fully incorporated," Alex declared. The room fell in stunned silence and all eyes were fixed on me. Junior faculty on the committee looked ashen. I adjourned the meeting partially out of embarrassment but mostly out of anger. I didn't want to be seen publicly undermined by one person after spending so much time and effort trying to develop a consensus around the final recommendations.

I just got an email from Alex, who is asking to speak in person.

I am not sure how this is going to go.