

First do no harm.

A new faculty member, Dr Sharpe, is in a kind of trouble. He is outstanding in many ways: he is very successful, comes from a high powered University, and is a recent “trophy” hire. But, many of the other faculty members are critical of him, perhaps because he has been critical of their productivity (It turns out that his boss, the Director, has been critical of the same faculty members.) They are beginning to harp on his flaws, and the negative rumors are becoming vicious even though no evidence has been offered to support them.

Even though Dr Sharpe has denied the truth of the rumors, they have hurt Dr Sharpe’s reputation and invitations for seminars and lectures have fallen off significantly. Dr Sharpe has asked for support from colleagues and superiors, but it has not helped. Some members of the faculty and the administration think it would be best if he left the school.

The director who hired Dr Sharpe is overwhelmed by the trouble, a little scared and insecure, and doesn’t know what to do. He doesn’t think the rumors are true about his new hire, but he won’t even admit that there are rumors when Dr Sharpe asks about them. Nonetheless, it is clear to Dr Sharpe that there are problems, perhaps serious ones. He repeatedly goes to his Director for help.

The Director, who is new and not very experienced himself, has been thinking about his options. He has been urged by his superiors to find the courage to do *something*.

1. The Director can ask Dr Sharpe to leave. This seems easy, allows him to largely ignore the problem, and shifts the burden to Dr Sharp. But some of his friends, more experienced administrators, point out that this could be harmful to Sharp because it will appear to outsiders that he couldn’t be defended, or was undesirable for some reason.
2. He can try to get another dept/school interested in Sharpe. The Director knows many department heads throughout the country and is considering calling them to say that Sharpe is “available” for hire. He actually does this with one other chair, but is met with suspicion and a blunt “no.” The other chair has heard about the rumors and wants to know if they are true and if Sharpe is in real trouble. The Director begins to realize that he is hurting Sharpe by taking this option. He has to decide if he cares.
3. The Director can explain the situation to Dr Sharpe and work with him and his opponents towards a solution. This will take time and effort, but will show that he has faith in Sharpe and that Sharpe still has value to the school. But it will mean that he may have to stand up against those who want Sharpe out of the school. The Director decides to announce that he plans to discuss this with Sharpe, find out the facts, and bring in professional helpers, if needed, to resolve the situation to everyone’s satisfaction as best he can. Even though the Director may be in some peril with this option, he feels that this is what Directors are paid to do.

Option #3 is obviously the collegial solution. Even though he may end up investigating Dr Sharpe for bad behavior, it does give Sharpe the dignity and due process he deserves. It may be that Sharpe will decide to leave anyway, or perhaps everyone will be satisfied by a to-be-discovered solution. The Director is to be congratulated in that the easiest solutions for him actually did harm to Dr Sharpe, and he chose to avoid them.