Insights and Outcomes

Case study: the bullying head of department

Questions

1. Is the situation experienced by Alex acceptable within the range of legitimate management behaviour in an environment where the school and department's business objectives were being met?

The old saying that the ends justify the means might at one time have excused the behaviour of Catherine Palmer, but in today's different environment this justification would be questioned and arguably challenged. What is considered acceptable behaviour and language is different to what used to prevail. There is of course the question of people being oversensitive to legitimate criticism or overreacting to isolated outbursts from managers, but in this case, the patterns of behaviour had become institutionalized and were difficult to justify by any business success although this may have been a factor.

2. It was surprising to Alex that HR hadn't become involved already—what explanations are there for this?

To understand the role of HR requires us to move away from the claims that HR professionals often make about their value and contributions and connect with the political realities of organizational life. That the school was being managed in the way that it was, was undoubtedly known within the institution. However, in the absence of formal complaints, HR may have chosen not to become involved at the formal level. There are clearly professional risks for those in HR if things develop out of their control. Assuming complaints had been made, HR may have decided to wait in the hope things would improve, or have rationalized the problem as not being serious enough to warrant formal investigation. Possible bad publicity following an investigation may also have been a factor. It is not unknown for HR to be complicit in trying to cover up managerial behaviours of this kind.

3. Is there any action Alex could take informally to raise his concerns?

Alex is in a difficult position. Who could he speak to? His ex-colleague who invited him to apply for the job? Again, personal relationships and sympathies only go so far in helping to deal with such a toxic situation. Often the whistle-blower is punished rather than those responsible, because the more senior the people involved, the more difficult it seems organizations find it to confront the situation and the people involved. Raising the matter with a trade union may have unpredictable consequences. Going to the departmental head would be a brave move.

4. What was missing in the way the college was being led that could have identified the problems Alex had experienced?

There is an issue of openness and transparency as well as honesty to consider. Institutions like this usually have a policy covering harassment and bullying but why wasn't this used? It is not enough to have such policies—there is a requirement that when appropriate they should be implemented. There are frequent cases where senior managers are protected by other senior managers regardless of whether the former's behaviour warrants investigation. Did the institution conduct staff surveys? Were the results confidential? Were senior managers interested enough in what they might be pointing to? Clearly, the psychological environment for some people was toxic. The longer this lasts, the harder it is to confront it without senior management being accused of condoning and even legitimizing it.

5. Are there any ethical dilemmas at play here?

Yes! One of course is for Alex and others to decide to protect themselves by saying and doing nothing while knowing that such behaviour was against stated institutional values and should be confronted; personal security against ethical values! Second, opening things up formally might adversely affect others, whether this is justified or not, so the consequences for others need to be considered. Possibly damage done to the institution's reputation and indirectly to the majority of good staff and students would need to be balanced by the need to stop the situation continuing and potentially becoming more serious.