

DR. MURRELL'S PROBLEM: DOING THE RIGHT THING OR DOING THE SMART THING?

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This case was written as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate the effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation. Names and locations have been disguised.

Dr. Phil Murrell, Chairman of the Business Administration Department at Capital State University, was asked by Alice Schmidt, Director of Extended Programs, to offer a management information systems (MIS) course at the Marshall Center, a branch of the university located 45 miles from the main campus. This request presented a challenge for Dr. Murrell for several reasons. He had already committed his full-time faculty in MIS to campus instruction, and there was a severe shortage of part-time MIS instructors. It was also hard to interest regular faculty in the Marshall assignment, even on an overload pay basis, due to the modest amount of compensation and the inconvenience of driving the round trip to the Marshall Center.

Although Dr. Murrell was disinclined to schedule the course, he learned that the Vice President for Academic Affairs, and the Dean of the College of Business to whom Dr. Murrell reported, had a strong interest in offering the courses at the Marshall Center. Becoming aware of the politics of the situation, Dr. Murrell sought to find a way to offer the MIS course. Finding no alternative that was very desirable, he pursued the idea of approaching one of the doctoral teaching assistants, Larry Dalton, about teaching the course on an overload basis. After some discussion, Larry agreed to this arrangement and Dr. Murrell believed he had solved the problem.

However, he learned that this was not the case as administrative hassles soon developed with several campus offices, including the Human Resource Department, the office of the Vice President of Business and Finance, and the Graduate School. At the end of the case, Dr. Murrell reflected on how he got himself into this situation and how he should work out of it. He further questioned if whether his cooperation was, in fact, a mistake since it resulted in significant job difficulties for him.

The case is intended for use in either undergraduate or graduate courses in organization and management, higher education administration, and organizational theory. The case situation relates to the following topics: organizational structure, bureaucracy, policies and procedures, delegation, authority and responsibility, administrative decision making, and power and politics in organizations.

Dr. Phil Murrell's bad week was continuing. He was talking on the phone with Dr. Martha Randolph, the newly appointed Dean of the Graduate School and was irritated by what he was hearing. He responded, "Yes, I do understand why you're concerned about this, but you need to know that I put no pressure on Larry to take on that additional assignment. And, Dean Randolph, this is a unique case. I am sure that we won't get in this situation again."

As their conversation ended, Dr. Randolph sounded less than convinced as she hung up, but Dr. Murrell didn't want to hear any more about it, at least right then. He sat back and began to recall the chain of events that had created this dilemma. After all, he thought, he had only been trying to help out his boss and support the university's outreach effort. But somehow, on December 1, two weeks after he became involved with this issue, he was enmeshed in campus politics, was entangled with several campus administrators, and had violated several university policies. As if his earlier hassles with the Manager of the Human Resources Department and the Vice President of Business and Finance were not enough, Phil had just finished a rather unpleasant conversation with Dr. Martha Randolph whom he had just recently met. In addition, Dr. Murrell had also learned a sobering lesson about university budgeting practices.

BACKGROUND

Dr. Phil Murrell was Chairman of the Department of Business Administration at Capital State University, a comprehensive university in the Southeast with an enrollment of over 18,000 students. The Department of Business Administration was one of four academic units in the College of Business. The department had 29 full-time faculty members plus a number of doctoral teaching assistants and part-time faculty. In his role as department chairman, Dr. Murrell was responsible for hiring and supervising faculty and part-time instructors, curriculum development, course scheduling, student advising, departmental budgets, and administrative, among other activities.

In addition to offering bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree programs on the main campus, three years earlier Capital State had begun to offer undergraduate work at

Marshall, a small city about 45 miles northeast of the campus. Although a complete business degree program was not available at the Marshall Center, the Department of Business Administration had been asked to offer courses at the center to meet the increasing demand for business courses from both community residents and military personnel at a nearby Naval air base.

Staffing these courses had generally been a problem for department heads in the College of Business due to a shortage of qualified faculty. The problem was especially severe for Dr. Murrell since he had difficulty even staffing the courses offered on the main campus. Although a department chairman would occasionally assign a full-time faculty member to teach at the Marshall Center, typically the chairman would hire a part-time instructor, a business or government executive who had at least a master's degree in the field, to teach at Marshall.

When Dr. Murrell was asked to schedule undergraduate management courses at Marshall in previous semesters, he had been able to staff them with part-time instructors who lived near the center. However, the recent request to offer a management information systems (MIS) course at that site presented a particular problem since he had had continuing difficulty finding faculty to cover MIS offerings on campus. Demand for MIS course offerings had rapidly increased with the burgeoning job opportunities for MIS professionals. It had been especially difficult to recruit additional part-time instructors qualified for MIS courses.

Full time faculty members generally resisted accepting an assignment at the center. Although the university paid for mileage and a meal, faculty members raised many objections to teaching at Marshall. These included not wanting to teach for three hours at night, dislike for the 90-mile round trip, complaints about the relatively poor classroom facilities at the site, and the loss of time from their work on campus. In some cases, faculty members had the opportunity to teach at Marshall as an addition to their regular teaching load. The overload pay was about \$2,000 per course, but this was not a sufficient inducement to interest them in this duty. As one faculty member put it:

Why would I or any other faculty member want to take on an extra course at Marshall for a little overload pay and travel expenses? It takes almost a workday by the time you allow for travel time, conference hours, and meeting with students after class. It is disruptive to my schedule and takes time from my research activities, which are a lot more important to my future than teaching an additional course off campus.

Dr. Murrell had put off offering this course on an earlier request, due to a shortage of staff. He knew, however, that it would be harder to refuse the request a second time. Also, he couldn't simply substitute another course that would be easier to staff since the students needed the MIS course to fulfill course-sequencing requirements. He had concluded that pressures to offer the section at Marshall could not be ignored, and he had committed to scheduling it that spring semester.

THE CHAIN OF EVENTS

The following incidents detail the development of the predicament that faced Dr. Murrell on December 1. A partial organization chart of Capital State University that identifies the involved parties is shown in Exhibit 1.

November 15

Dr. Murrell received a telephone call from Alice Schmidt, Director of Extended Programs, whom he had known for several years.

Alice: Phil, we really need to offer that intro MIS course at Marshall this spring semester. Can you work it in?

Phil: Alice, I know we talked about that possibility last week, but I just don't see how we can do it. I don't have the faculty—full or part-time—to offer the MIS courses we need here on campus. So I really don't see how it can be done this spring. Isn't there another course that you can schedule up there this time?

Alice: Well, frankly, we're at the point where we need to offer that MIS course. There really aren't any other options for most of those students. They need the course to make progress on their degrees. You know we've made a commitment to schedule all of our basic courses there. Also, Dr. Jordan (John Jordan, Vice-President for Academic Affairs) wants to see our center become successful. Phil, you may know that Ivy State University is also starting to offer courses up there—they're leasing classroom space in an elementary school building! Dr. Jordan wants to make sure that we don't lose our foothold there. He wants to see the Marshall Center become a Capital State campus in the future. So, you can see that it's important for us to maintain a strong presence there. We'd really like for you to cooperate with us in offering this course. Can't you work something out?

Phil: Well, Alice, I really don't think so. All of our regular MIS teaching staff are fully scheduled. And no one who's qualified to teach the course wants to take it for the small amount of overload pay we can offer. Plus, given our restrictive

compensation policy, it might be hard to get it approved through the system anyway. But I'll give it some more thought, OK?

Alice: All right, let me know if you need any help. I think Dr. Jordan would be willing to support you if you have any problem up the line getting an appointment worked out. In fact, we would even be willing to pay for a part-time faculty member from the Extended Programs budget to get this course staffed. That should help you out. I'll call you back in a day or so.

Dr. Murrell: Well, Alice, thanks for your offer. I will be glad to take you up on it—if I can locate a qualified instructor. Talk with you again soon.

November 17

Dr. Murrell was walking into a meeting with the other department chairmen and dean's staff when Jack Lawrence, Associate Dean of the College of Business, stopped him.

Jack: Hey, Phil! The Dean asked me to check with you about that MIS course at Marshall this spring. He got a call from Dr. Jordan about our college offerings up there. Do you have it scheduled?

Phil: Yes, Jack, it's listed in the schedule, but I've got no one to teach it. We might have to cancel it.

Jack: Well, we should try to work it out because the dean wants us to be "good citizens" on campus in supporting these extended programs.

Phil (grimacing): Look, Jack, you must know that I'm just out of staff in that area. I can hardly get my campus MIS courses covered. If it's really important, I guess I could cancel a section on campus that has 40 to 50 students and free up a faculty member to go to Marshall to teach 10 to 12—if we're lucky. But the college would actually lose credit hours in the deal.¹ What's so darned important about this little off-campus program?

Jack: Now, Phil, we really don't want to be canceling courses here. I see the problem, but Dr. Jordan wants our courses covered at Marshall, and the Dean wants us to cooperate. I guess Jordan sees Marshall as a long-term growth opportunity for Capital State. Well, it's five minutes after two and we better get into the meeting.

November 18

Knowing that the Marshall problem was not going to go away, Dr. Murrell reviewed again the alternatives for staffing the course. Although it seemed stupid even to contemplate it, he had actually thought about canceling a section on campus to free up a faculty member to cover the course at Marshall. If he cancelled a campus section, that would mean losing some campus credit hours, but perhaps some of the students enrolled in the cancelled section would then register for other sections of the course. But then, he would also have to deal with some disgruntled students who had already scheduled that particular section.

Also, Dr. Murrell recognized that Alice Schmidt's offer to pay for the section at Marshall could help out his own budget. He knew that the Department of Business Administration was already burdened with having to meet obligations for several part-time instructors for the next semester, apart from the further strain of funding the course at Marshall.

Then he got an idea—something that he had not previously considered. He could ask Larry Dalton, one of the doctoral graduate assistantsⁱⁱ in his department, to teach the course at Marshall in addition to his regular load of two campus classes. Larry was in the fourth year of the Ph.D. program and had taught that MIS course before, thus this would not be a new course preparation. Dr. Murrell figured that he could probably pay Larry on a part-time instructor basis for teaching the course (about \$1,800) in addition to his half-time pay as a doctoral teaching assistant (approximately \$10,000 for the academic year plus waiver of tuition). Dr. Murrell was encouraged. *This idea has some promise!* he thought.

He called Larry and they met that afternoon to discuss the situation. After hearing the details of the situation, Larry seemed quite interested in the opportunity. Dr. Murrell was careful not to pressure Larry to accept the assignment since he was aware of Larry's GA responsibilities and sensitive to Larry's need to make progress on his doctoral dissertation. About a short discussion, Larry agreed to take the assignment, noting that he, like most doctoral students, "could really use the money" that the additional job would provide. Dr. Murrell breathed a sigh of relief. Later than afternoon as Dr. Murrell prepared the appointment form, he felt that his problem was solved.

November 20

Alice Schmidt called back to inquire about the Marshall course. Dr. Murrell was pleased to tell her that he had an experienced doctoral assistant scheduled for it on an overload pay basis, and he reminded her of her offer to pay for the course from the Extended Programs budget. Alice responded that she didn't see any problem with that and thanked him for his help in getting the course staffed. She also offered her assistance if he had any problems with the paperwork.

November 27

Brenda Patterson, Employment Manager of the Human Resource Department, called Dr. Murrell.

Ms. Patterson: Hello, Dr. Murrell, I'm having a little problem processing the appointment papers for a Larry Dalton who is scheduled to teach at Marshall this spring. According to our records, you've already got him on a half-time position as a GA, and you now want to put him on another part-time position. I'm sorry, but we just can't do that. It's against university policy.

Dr. Murrell: Ms. Patterson, haven't we handled similar appointments for overload payment before?

Ms. Patterson: Well, Dr. Murrell, overload pay is not really the problem. The problem is that Mr. Dalton would have two part-time appointments in the same department—that's what we can't handle. The system just won't take it.

Dr. Murrell: It won't take it, hm. . . OK, Ms. Patterson, what can we do to get this worked out?

Ms. Patterson: Well, you'll have to get Vice President Simpson's (Harold Simpson, Vice President of Business and Finance) approval, I guess. Write a memo of justification and, if he approves it, send it to me, and I can process this appointment.

Dr. Murrell: That's not what I want to hear, Ms. Patterson, but if that's what's necessary, that's what I'll have to do.

Ms. Patterson: Sorry, Dr. Murrell, but I don't have any other suggestions. I'll be glad to help you if you can get the go-ahead from Dr. Simpson.

As Dr. Murrell put down the phone, he had the nagging feeling that this situation was going to become a bigger problem than he'd anticipated. Later that day, Phil prepared the memo-randum to Dr. Simpson and had it delivered to his office.

November 30 at 9:00 A.M.

Dr. Murrell received a call from Bill Mays, Assistant to Vice President Simpson.

Mr. Mays: Hello, Dr. Murrell, I'm looking at your memo and the appointment papers on Larry Dalton. We've got some trouble with this one. Dr. Simpson has

OK'd the two part-time appointments, but you've appointed Mr. Dalton as an instructor, a faculty position, and he already shows up on our staff roster as a doctoral graduate assistant. How can he be both a faculty member and a graduate assistant at the same time?

Dr. Murrell: Mr. Mays, that's a good question, but this is a rather un-usual set of circumstances. You see, . . . (Dr. Murrell explained).

Mr. Mays: I can understand that you're in a squeeze, but I can't approve this as it stands. The state auditors could nail us if Dalton shows up on our payroll as both a faculty member and a graduate assistant at the same time.

Dr. Murrell: So what can be done? I need to get this handled some way. I've committed to offer the course and to hiring this person to teach it.

Mr. Mays: Well, write a memo addressed to Vice President Simpson and send it to me. I'll take it to him and try to explain the situation, but I don't know if he'll go along with this or not.

Dr. Murrell: OK, Mr. Mays, these memos are getting a little tiresome, but I'll get it to you. Thanks for your suggestion.

Following this conversation, Phil began to compose the memorandum, explaining the circumstances and providing the explanation that detailed why he thought it was necessary to get Larry Dalton's appointment approved. He was frustrated with the entire matter, but he tried to retain his composure.

November 30 at 2:30 P.M.

Dr. Murrell received a call from Jack Lawrence, Associate Dean of the College.

Jack: Phil, I am glad to learn that you've been able to staff the Marshall MIS course next semester. That's good news. But you do know that you'll have to take the part-time instructor money from your budget, right?

Phil: No, Jack, that's not my understanding. Alice Schmidt told me that she would pay for it from the Extended Programs budget. You know that I'm already stretched to cover the part-time instructors we have lined up for campus offerings.

Jack: Well, Phil, I'm sorry to tell you this, but that's not exactly right. It is true that Alice agreed to fund the Marshall section of the MIS course from the Extended

Programs' budget. But since this is a College of Business course, Dr. Jordan's office informed us that they had to cut the part-time allocation to the College by one section which will, in turn, result in a corresponding reduction to you, in the Business Administration Department. The bottom line is that there's no free lunch here. Jordan's budget analyst considers this to be a business course that the College should fund from its existing allocation.

Phil: Jack, wait a minute! I can't believe Alice would mislead me on this.

Jack: I don't think she meant to, Phil. I'm not even sure she had all the information or understood all this at the time. Well, anyway, that's the story.

Phil (with resignation): OK, we'll press on, I guess.

December 1

When Dr. Murrell returned from lunch, he had a message to call Dr. Martha Randolph, the new Dean of the Graduate School. Dr. Murrell had met her at a reception earlier in the fall semester, but did not know her well. In her short tenure at Capital State, she had gained a reputation as a formal, "by the book" administrator.

Dr. Murrell: Hello, Dr. Randolph, this is Phil Murrell in the Business Administration Department. I had a message you had called.

Dr. Randolph: Yes, Dr. Murrell, thanks for returning my call. The matter I called you about concerns a doctoral student in your department, Larry Dalton. I understand that you are assigning him to teach a course on an overload basis at the Marshall Center in addition to his regular duties as a doctoral teaching assistant. I also understand that you are giving him overload pay for this. This strikes me as a little irregular and probably improper. How will he be able to meet his responsibilities to himself as a student if we overload him?

Dr. Murrell: Dr. Randolph, I agree with you that this is an undesirable situation, and I'm as concerned about it as you. Unfortunately, we had no alternative to having Larry teach the section at Marshall. It was a most unusual situation. You see, . . . (Dr. Murrell explained).

Dr. Randolph: But what does this say about the way we treat our doctoral students. After all, we need to support their progress toward degree completion, not overload them by placing extra burdens on them in addition to their regular duties. GAs are supposed to be working no more than half time. Dr. Murrell, I'm not inclined to approve this kind of extra assignment for a GA.

Dr. Murrell: I assure you, Dr. Randolph, under normal circumstances, I would concur completely. But the department was, frankly, getting a lot of pressure to offer this MIS course at Marshall and under pretty short notice to do it. Undesirable as it is, it's the only solution that I could come up with.

Dr. Randolph: Well, it's hardly a solution in my view. I can see your problem, but doesn't this put unfair pressure on the student? Isn't it hard for him to refuse such a request when he is working on a degree in your department?

Dr. Murrell: I don't think Larry felt he had to accept this extra course. He was willing to teach the course for the additional income. But I assure you that I don't like this situation any more than you do.

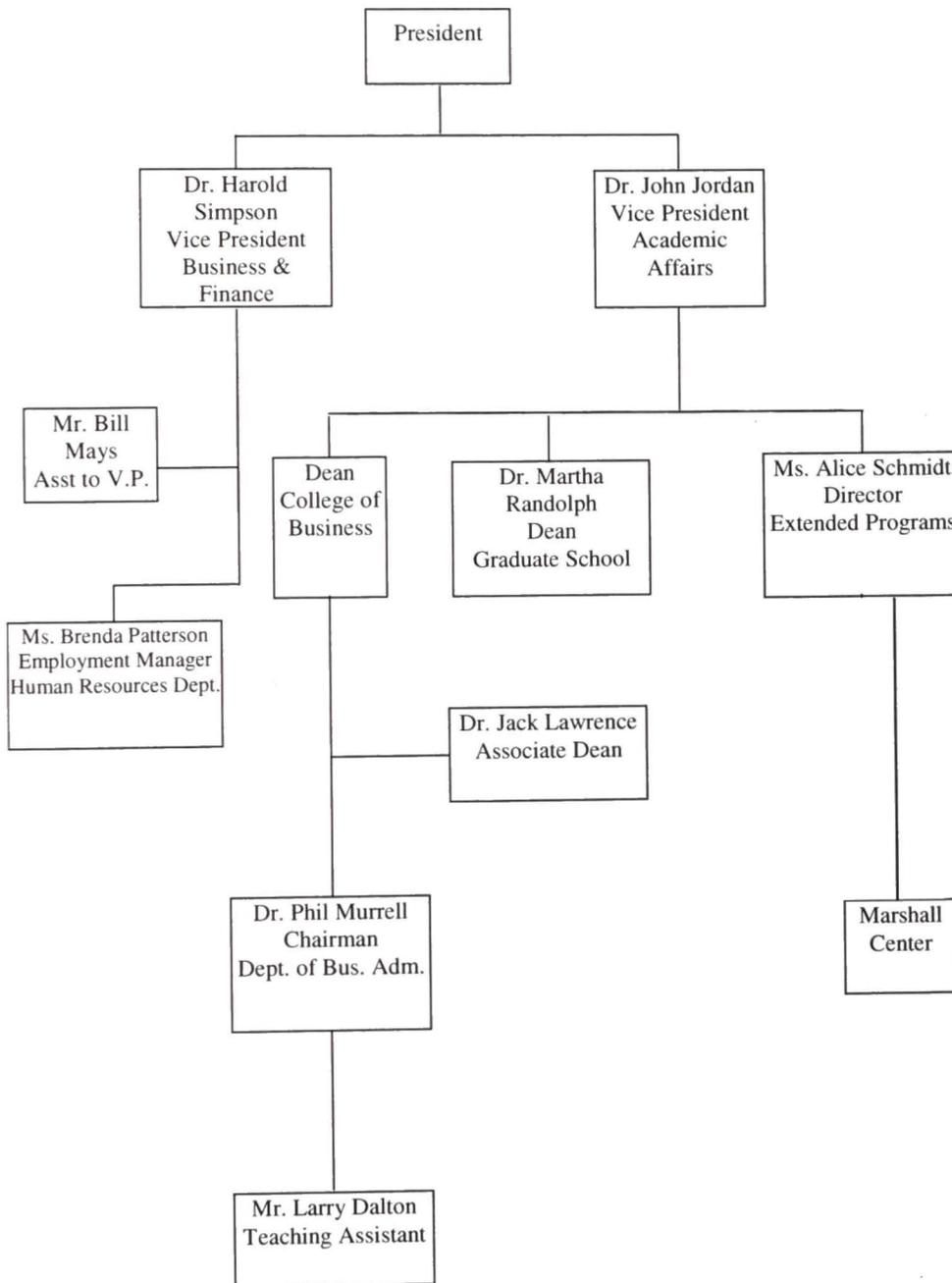
Dr. Randolph: Well, Dr. Murrell, I believe we've about exhausted this conversation. But I urge you to bear in mind the concern for quality in our graduate programs, and putting graduate assistants on an overload assignment does not support quality!

Dr. Murrell: Yes, I do understand why you're concerned about this, but you need to know that I put no pressure on Larry to take on that additional assignment. And Dean Randolph, this was really a unique case. I am sure that we won't get into this situation again.

As Dr. Murrell sat at his desk, he reflected on how this whole thing had gotten out of control. He thought about the stack of papers on his desk, particularly the overdue accreditation report that he ought to be working on. How had this basically routine task of offering a course at an off-campus center and hiring an instructor become such a time-consuming, burdensome exercise? He was troubled that his willingness to offer the course at Marshall was causing him so many hassles when he certainly had many other things to do. After all, he was just trying to help out. Maybe the best thing would have been for him to try to refuse offering the course, emphasizing the limited faculty resources and the short notice he was given? After the initial criticism he would have received, it might have caused him fewer problems. He wondered.

EXHIBIT 1

**Capital State University
Partial Organization Chart**



ENDNOTES

ⁱ *Student credit hours were defined as the number of students in a course multiplied by the course credit hours, e.g., 40 students enrolled in a three credit-hour course would generate 120 student credit hours. Student credit-hour production is often used as a measure of faculty productivity or efficiency of academic administration.*

ⁱⁱ *Graduate assistants (GAs) were part-time university employees who worked 20 hours per week while pursuing graduate degrees. For Larry this translated to teaching two sections of a three credit-hour course for which he received remission of tuition and a monthly stipend.*

ADDITIONAL READINGS

Management (5th edition) by Richard Daft, The Dryden Press, 2000, Chapter 10, "Fundamentals of Organizing," pp. 304-329.

Organizational Theory and Design (6th edition) by Richard Daft, South-Western College Publishing, 1998, Chapter 5, "Organizational Size, Life Cycle, and Decline," especially pp. 165-173, and Chapter 12, "Power and Politics," pp. 441-471.

"The Ideal Bureaucracy" by Max Weber, from The Theory of Social and Economic Organizations by Max Weber, translated by Talcott Parsons and A. M. Henderson, reprinted in Management and Organizational Behavior Classics (7th edition) by Michael Matteson and John Ivancevich, Irwin-McGraw Hill, 1999, pp. 131-137.