**Just Visiting: How to Give an Internal Candidate the Bad News**



January 30, 2014

“Don’t burn the building down.” This was the sage advice I was given by a dear friend after I told him that I wouldn’t be considered for the tenure-track position that would replace my visiting assistant professorship.

I reflect on this piece of advice daily, sometimes hourly, in an effort to convince myself that everything is going to be fine. You and I know, however, that this is a happy fiction. After I got the news, as I sat on the floor of my kitchen simultaneously crying, laughing, gnashing my teeth, and allowing the brinner I was making to char away on the stove, I had an epiphany: I’m pond scum. I lack the power, the drive, and the desire to damage what has been my home for four years. I've helped build something wonderful for years - I would never want to see it ruined.

To the teeming horde of individuals jockeying to obtain or keep a position as a valued faculty member: I have little to say at this moment that you don’t already know. A substantial and deeply meaningful element of your core identity is tied to your profession, of being able to be an academic. Losing your position represents the death of your identity, the annihilation of your self. Your identity is contingent not upon publishing or getting high marks for teaching, or for being otherwise amazing; it is contingent upon being employed, which isn’t in your power to control.

It’s the people who do have some control—your tenured and tenure-track colleagues—that I need to chat with right now.

Dear department heads and search committee members: I recognize that you will need to make tough decisions about personnel, especially if you have an internal candidate. I have the feeling that you’ve not had one of your former colleagues sit you down and speak honestly about how he or she would like to be treated, so you’ll benefit from my will to honesty. Feel free to pour a stiff drink before reading further.

First and foremost, **this isn’t about you.** Phrases like “This is hard for me, too” and “You just don’t understand how this makes me feel” should be avoided. Poking your newly unemployed (let’s be honest—that’s the de facto result) colleague for remorse, compassion, and empathy is a grotesque display of self-absorption and narcissism.

If you actually need to prove your communal suffering, **the best thing you can do is help.** How difficult would it be to write a letter about your soon-to-be-former colleague so glowing that it can’t be ignored by other search committees, even in the dark? If your colleague’s work has been exceptional, go the extra mile that she went for you—get everyone on the search committee or in the department to co-sign it in solidarity. Twist the arm of the dean to provide the final flourish that may just push her candidacy over the top.

As a token of thanks for services rendered, **supply your former colleague with parting gifts** that are both professional and practical. Think about providing her with tools she isn’t going to be guaranteed now that she lacks institutional support: Custom [business cards](http://www.vistaprint.com/business-cards.aspx?txi=15627&xnid=TopNav_Premium+Business+Cards+%28linked+item%29_Business+Cards&xnav=TopNav) and [e-letterhead](http://www.e-letterhead.com/), one year’s membership in a [professional association](http://www.apsanet.org/) that handles job placement, one year’s zero-time research-associate status so she can access the university library and stay up-to-date on literature, and a four-year, academic subscription to [Microsoft Office 365](http://www.microsoftstore.com/store/msusa/en_US/pdp/Office-365-University/productID.275549300) are all viable options at reasonable price points.

Just give the business cards and e-letterhead through gift cards, because her address may well change soon. And don’t offer to help and fail to follow through; this will further alienate her and increase her suffering.

Speaking of suffering, there is a population of highly vulnerable individuals who will be affected by the change, but who are usually distanced from personnel decisions—the students. These tuition-paying, impermanent features of the university have likely established relationships with their professors, even those with “adjunct” and “visiting” in their titles. The smaller the number of faculty in your department and the longer this professor has been with you, the greater the impact her departure is going to have.

Develop a plan to **deepen relationships between the students and remaining faculty.** Aspiring candidates for graduate school, internships, and employment shouldn’t find themselves sending requests for recommendation letters to your former colleague who may no longer enjoy reliable Internet access and has no academic title.

Also, if your departing colleague excelled at her job, she has likely established a milieu that you take for granted, but shouldn’t. Do your students produce a lot of research? Do they maintain an active club? Do they dominate interuniversity competitions such as debate, physics bowl, or model UN? If permanent faculty haven’t been overseeing this culture of excellence, they will either need to pick up the baton or you will need to plan for life without it, including its impact on recruitment and placement.

It’s seductive to think that academic-employment decisions are a blend of dispassionate [meritocracy](http://notesironbound.blogspot.com/2013/08/of-meritocracy-and-academic-lifeboaters.html) and [fit](http://pankisseskafka.com/2013/06/12/why-are-adjuncts-only-fit-for-the-glue-factory/) similar to peer review and the scientific method. You may even find yourself channeling *The Godfather*: “This isn’t personal. It’s strictly business.” If and when you do, remember that Michael Corleone was convincing his brothers that he should kill the men who broke his jaw and attempted to assassinate his father.

The salient lesson here is that even business practices have human elements that are deeply personal to those who experience them. A wonderful response to the *Godfather* line comes from *You’ve Got Mail*: “What is that supposed to mean? I am so sick of that. All that means is that it wasn't personal to you. But it was personal to me. It's personal to a lot of people.” Denying the human element doesn’t make it go away; it merely provides a cursory justification for treating candidates like curricula vitae, rather than persons with [dignity](http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/preamble.shtml).

As you and your tenured colleagues spend tremendous amounts of time on the byzantine process of hiring a replacement, it may prove just as useful to facilitate a smooth transition out for your current colleague as it is to convince your departmental rival to support your secretly chosen candidate, [just as planned](http://1d4chan.org/wiki/Just_As_Planned). Most aspiring and journeyman academics are consummate professionals who know that [failure is a reality](http://pi.library.yorku.ca/ojs/index.php/theoriandpraxis/article/viewFile/38006/34454) of life and will continue to give the program, the students, and the university their very best effort until they leave. They will come to work everyday and watch inspirational speeches that remind them to [rise up](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8yOdAqBFcQ), [to embrace backup plans](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtjGvBnAxVE), and to [keep moving forward](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_Vg4uyYwEk).

As you watch these academics come and go from your institution, you’ll begin to realize that they don’t present a clear and present danger to you. They aren’t going to sully the great name of your college or university. And they aren’t going to burn the buildings down.

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*- See more at: https://chroniclevitae.com/news/305-just-visiting-how-to-give-an-internal-candidate-the-bad-news?cid=megamenu#sthash.NYexYBBT.dpuf*