

The Dean Who Left in a Hurry

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Abstract

This case study focuses on how the Chancellor of a university carried out his functions in order to obtain a high ranking in terms of the ranking of academic institutions for the university he headed. The Dean of the Business School, a constituent college of the university and a capable person, also became a part of the events and added her inputs to the events described in this case. The importance of culture, and how much this is critical in terms of an institution reaching and perhaps surpassing its strategic goals, are also highlighted. The discussion points of the case and the one around which it revolves are the importance of maintaining ethical standards in an academic institute and in running such an institute. This will of course apply equally to organizations in the corporate sector and so this case has wider ramifications in terms of its reach to students and academics and people from the corporates. Its value from the learning perspective will be of particular benefit to students who are on the verge of starting their careers as they will be given inputs into real life workings of an institute.

Key Words: organizational ethics, ethical culture, organizational values, university rankings

‘And enterprises of great pith and moment, With this regard, their currents turn awry, And lose the name of action.’ ‘Hamlet’ Act III, Scene I

Background

Krishna University is now a well-established university located on the outskirts of Delhi. The university started in a small way as a Business School and Law school, and initially offered only a few business and law degrees. It functioned as an academic institution affiliated to Delhi University which actually gave the degrees. It did well in these areas and was slowly getting noticed by the education fraternity. People in the know were claiming that in a few years it would become a full university which was bound to expand and be ranked among the top ten in India. This prediction came true and in the year 2005 it became a full private university under the aegis of the Delhi government. By this time it had added an Engineering College along with the original Management School to its portfolio, thus qualifying it to be called a university.

The overarching goal of Krishna University was to become a world class university. This is not an easy task as many in the educational sector are aware. A major factor for success is a combination of freedom, autonomy and leadership. World-class universities thrive in an environment that fosters competitiveness, unrestrained scientific inquiry, critical thinking, innovation and creativity. Institutions that have complete autonomy are also more agile, because they are not bound by clunky bureaucracies and externally imposed standards. The original Business School had grown over the years and now (in 2019) consisted of around 300 MBA students and 200 students who were pursuing a post graduate diploma in management. Being a university, Krishna University was now entitled to issue its own degrees and diplomas and not depend on Delhi University for this purpose. Both these programs were for a duration of two years. There were the standard breaks for internships and for those who qualified, a chance to study in a university abroad for a few months.

The Discussion Points

The main problem with the university was one relating to personalities and stemming from this the culture which was in place in the university. The Chancellor was keen that the university was ranked as one of the top five universities in the country. He was very particular on this and was prepared to work hard and also get his colleagues to do the same. He had as his deputy Dr. Praveena Pai his Dean of the Business School who was a stickler for going by the book. Incidentally, she was very strong in her academic qualifications and job knowledge, and ethical principles and had made this known to her colleagues.

The Administrative Structure

The administrative pyramid had at its top the Chancellor (Dr. Lawrence Mathias) and Vice Chancellor (Dr. Ajit Jadhav). A Dean headed the colleges of Business, Law and Engineering. In the Business School this position was held by Dr. Praveena Pai.

Dr. Mathias had worked in the University of Calcutta earlier and was an able and intelligent administrator and teacher. He had joined Krishna University 10 months ago and was determined to deliver on the vision and mission statements of the university. The Board of Governors had identified him to take up the position of Chancellor after careful consideration. They had specifically probed him during the interview on his having a cultural fit with the university. Dr. Mathias knew how to handle the questions related to this and he came through with the Board satisfied that they had found the right person. They had impressed on him that they believed that universities evolved gradually and their growth could not be hurried but only facilitated. Dr. Mathias had fully agreed with them and they parted from the meeting on good terms. He told them on leaving that the university was in safe hands and that he would make sure that he did everything to bring it up to the ideals held by the Board. He assured that he would be urging his colleagues in all the colleges to live up to the high standards he would set. So the Board of Governors was pleased that they had found in Dr. Mathias an ideal person to occupy the position of Chancellor.

Dr. Mathias, soon after joining and taking up his functions realized that getting the university to be among the top ranking universities was not an easy task. This did not come as a surprise to him as he was familiar with working in academic institutions; but heading one and delivering was proving to be difficult. In most cases, world-class universities recruit students and faculty without concern for national borders. This enables them to focus on attracting the most talented people, no matter where they come from, and open themselves to new ideas and approaches. Dr. Mathias decided to follow this route.

We now come to the second actor in the incidents narrated, that is Dr. Praveena Pai, the Dean of the Business School. She had received a B.A. degree from Lady Shri Ram College for Women of the University of Delhi in 1992 and an M.A. degree in Economics from Delhi School of Economics, also of the University of Delhi, in 1994. She then completed an M.A. degree at the University of Washington in 1996. In 2001, she obtained her doctoral degree from Princeton University, where her dissertation advisors were internationally known economists. She was awarded the Princeton's Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Research Award while doing her doctoral research at Princeton. Some members of the faculty felt that she ought to have been the Vice Chancellor considering her qualifications and ability to deliver superb lectures. The Board of Governors also felt that she could do the job well but thought that she was too young for the position. She had joined Krishna University a year ago and had settled down well in her job. She was well liked by her colleagues and students and was destined to do well in life. Dr. Pai had a lot of plans for the Business School and was all set to put them to practice. She had informally bounced these off a few of her senior colleagues and had received an enthusiastic response. One of these was to bring in well qualified faculty from abroad for a minimum six months period to teach in the Business School. The other was to ensure that the university earned a name for conducting week long management development programs. These were only the initial plans, after which she had decided to move ahead full steam.

She realized that alumni are also an important part of the Business School experience. While professors teach theory and practice, alumni would provide insight into the real business world. As such, she planned to make the alumni more integrated into the placement process. She started by resuscitating the Alumni Society and ensuring that a senior alum would come at least once a month (from different industries) to address the students. She was keen that the students were as aware as possible as to what they could expect to confront when they started their working careers.

There was one significant issue which gave Dr. Pai a lot of uneasiness. This was the importance given by many universities in India to the ranks they were given by agencies. Appendix A gives details on how the rankings have come to assume an inordinate amount of importance for universities. It is evident that rankings do have a value as a reference and as basis for comparisons. However, they do not always serve as the best proxy of quality and relevance of tertiary education institutions. It has also to be kept in mind that any ranking is eventually an arbitrary arrangement of indicators aimed at labelling what it is being pre-defined by the ranker as a “good” educational institution. But many would be students gave a lot of importance to university rankings and the ranking of a university was a ‘pull’ factor in attracting students in large numbers. This was important as there were many universities competing for the same pool of students and every differentiating bit helped. In any case the ranking system was an established fact in India and most universities welcomed the system.

Another dimension of rankings intends to measure “reputation” by gathering opinions from employers, field experts and/or alumni. Quite expectedly, some people tend to favour certain institutions regardless of the quality of their academic programs. As such, other institutions and programs that may not have a famous name, but are providing meaningful contributions to the society by producing the graduates required for their local and regional economy, fall by the wayside.

This aspect of the myriad complexities of the ranking system came up at an informal faculty meeting consisting of a few senior faculty and included the Chancellor and Vice Chancellor. It happened during the mid-morning tea break in the faculty room, which was an informal gathering which occurred every day and often served as a sounding board for faculty across disciplines to air some views or problems they faced. At this particular meeting, the Chancellor was holding forth on his pet topic – the importance given by the government and the regulatory bodies to universities in accordance with the higher ranking they obtained in surveys. He had strong views on this a subject though it was not shared by all; particularly by Dr. Praveena Pai who was totally against the importance given to the rankings of universities. Her view was that rankings do not make a university, but the quality of the faculty and the quality of the incoming students. She was of the view like many people in the academic profession, that a university should aim to deliver good quality teaching and ensure that research was done at a high level which was not just research for the sake of research but was of use to corporates; in other words, she believed in applied research. The difference between applied and fundamental or basic research is straightforward – findings of applied research can be applied to resolve issues, whereas fundamental studies are used simply to explore certain issues and elements.

However, many universities participated in these ranking surveys with a lot of enthusiasm and the rank they obtained was prominently displayed in their advertisements. Many top universities refused to take part in these surveys as they felt that it was an exercise in futility and that the best way of being known in the education circles was through word of mouth comments made by the students. In other words, they felt that it was below their dignity to take part in these surveys. Some agencies got round this refusal to participate by giving them ranks based on relevant and published data available in the public domain. Dr. Pai as we have seen, was totally against this system of setting a lot of value to the rank, and had made her views well known in the Business School. Dr. Mathias felt that it was a tangible way of measuring the progress of a University or Business School, though it went against the views of the Dean. Unfortunately for him, this was a matter which was directly under the control of the Dean and as such he could not directly intervene and force her to take part in the ranking processes. Dr. Pai knew about her superior's views but being an independent person, did not change her stance on this matter.

The Prevailing University Culture

In line with the management styles of the top two people in the University, there was really no openness or transparency in the various systems they followed. The culture had started to become one of secrecy and connivance. The faculty also felt this but many were prepared to bear it as they were not prepared to rock the boat by standing up to the Chancellor.

It was necessary that a knowledge and research based culture should prevail in the university for it to do well. Ponnuswamy (2016) conducted a study of university culture and the results showed that there exists a significant and positive correlation amongst the constructs of learning organization culture, knowledge performance and research performance. Further, the results showed that knowledge performance is a statistically significant predictor of research performance.

To briefly look at culture a little more, an organization's customs, traditions, rituals, behavioural norms, symbols and general way of doing things are the visible manifestation of its culture; they are what one sees when walking into the organization. The current organizational culture is usually due to factors that have worked well for the organization in the past. This however, does not apply to what was happening in Krishna University.

Though culture emerges naturally in most organizations, strong cultures often begin with a process called "values blueprinting," which involves a candid conversation with leaders from across the organization. Bouton (2015), indicated that 'culture fit is the glue that holds an

organization together. That's why it's a key trait to look for when recruiting. The result of poor culture fit due to turnover can cost an organization between 50-60% of the person's annual salary, according to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). But before the hiring team starts measuring candidates' culture fit, they need to be able to define and articulate the organization's culture – its values, goals, and practices — and then weave this understanding into the hiring process.'

Each person has a favourite way of doing the job and Dr. Mathias was in the habit of calling for faculty meetings at frequent intervals. He felt that this kept him in touch with what he called the 'pulse of the university'. He felt that it was his responsibility as the Chancellor to feel the pulse as often as possible, however much the faculty members disliked this practice. But in view of the culture he was slowly causing to permeate through the university, this pulse checking was perceived to be one more of the Chancellor's intruding practices by the faculty. 'Surely, he can send an email and get the points he wanted put across' was a comment heard more and more frequently from the faculty. He also called these meetings at the last possible moment thus making many people cancel appointments made earlier.

Sometimes these meetings lasted more than two hours with only minor points discussed. For example, at the last meeting over 45 minutes were spent on discussing whether faculty should wear ties all the time or only when they were taking classes. 'He can take all my ties and keep them ...' one faculty member was heard to remark. At another meeting fully one hour was spent on whether attendance should be taken before the class started or when it was over. Dr. Pai's view that taking attendance was something which was as dated as the dinosaurs, did not add to her popularity with Dr. Mathias, though it did with her colleagues.

In any case, the Chancellor gave a lot of importance to these meetings and so they continued to be held; the faculty had to bear it as it went with the territory.

The Denouement

A meeting of the faculty had been called by the Chancellor (again without prior notice) as he had something important to discuss, as he told some of his favourites. He had scheduled the meeting for a Saturday afternoon, by which time people were looking forward the Sunday weekend. At 3.00 pm all faculty members were gathered in one of the larger classrooms and were waiting for the Chancellor to arrive. He usually made a dramatic last minute entrance carrying a lot of papers followed by an office staff also carrying a lot of papers, and he did not disappoint at this meeting either.

He fussed around at the lectern and then looked around the room. His favourites fussed around him, smoothening his suit and straightening his tie. The technicians fussed around the sound equipment. The office staff fussed around with the papers. The room was full and this appeared to satisfy him; he clasped the lectern with both hands, leaned forward a little and glanced round. There was no fixed seating rules at these meetings and Dr. Pai usually sat near the back with her friends. It was not unknown for them to pass comments in whispers which only those around them heard, but appreciated.

'Dear colleagues', he began. 'I am glad all of you could make it for this very important meeting.' Someone was heard to mutter 'did we have a choice?' in a rather loud voice but was hushed up by his friends. The Chancellor pretended not to hear the remark, though it was plainly audible to him. He took a sip of water to tide over the interruption.

'I have come to say that I have given a lot of thought to what I am going to tell you. Some of you may not agree with me, but in the larger interests of this university I request you to

support me. I want you to fall in line with my thinking even though you may not feel it is on the right lines. As you know, as the Chancellor I have certain responsibilities and I feel I have to tackle these to the satisfaction of the Board of Governors. He went on; 'As you all know, I intend to make this university one of the best in India and in due course, one of the best internationally. I intend to attract the best students and faculty so that we can fulfil this goal as quickly as possible. We are a united family and I know I can depend on your support. I have now come to the conclusion that one of the best ways to get noticed is to move up in the university rankings. There are a number of rating agencies in India which have a very good reputation and I have been in touch with three or four of them. The first rating agency will be coming over to start work next week.' He smiled and looked round the room, pointedly avoiding meeting the Dean's eyes.

Dr. Praveena Pai was not by nature one to keep quiet at a provocation, but she decided to hold on for a bit more to see what was to come.

'I plan to have the other rating agencies come in one by one and I have also told them that we want the results quickly. We will give these results wide publicity through advertisements in the press and in our brochures. I am sure the ranking we get will have a tremendous impact on the quality of intake of students and faculty.'

'What if we get a bad rating?' asked a senior member of the faculty. The others nodded.

The Chancellor looked at the questioner. 'I have put in place mechanisms that will ensure we will get a good rating from all of them. The days when we got an average rating year after year are over. It was getting intolerably painful and I have decided to put a stop to it. I have also cleared this with the Board of Governors.'

This was too much for Dr. Pai. 'Can you elaborate on the type of mechanisms you have put in place?' she asked.

'I would prefer not to', said the Chancellor. 'There are many things in this university which everyone need not be privy to. I am the best judge of what should be in the public domain. There are many things in heaven and earth Horatio....'

Dr. Pai was losing her patience and this was obvious to everyone by this time. 'Nevertheless, I wish to know what these so called mechanisms are, and not listen to Shakespeare,' she said. 'After all, as you said we are a united family, and so we have every right to know what you are planning', she added.

'I refuse to divulge anything more and if you wish you can come to my office after the meeting', said the Chancellor. 'There is a time and place for these things to be discussed.'

'Why, what are you afraid of revealing? For the record we all know what these mechanisms are. And the time and place seems fully appropriate to me, and I am sure to all of us.' There was a vigorous nodding of many heads which seemed to anger the Chancellor even more. He glowered at those present. By this time the Chancellor was bitterly regretting his earlier remark about the 'mechanisms'. This made him unusually aggressive and he said, 'Please remember Dr. Pai that you are talking to the Chancellor. I have every right to disclose what is or is not appropriate. Neither you nor anyone else need question me on what I do.'

An inflamed Dr. Pai retorted, 'In that case I recommend that you tell what you wish to tell to the others as I do not plan to stand any more nonsense.' With that she gathered up her papers and left the room. She left a stunned silence behind her which no one seemed inclined to break.

The meeting was in disarray by this time and the Chancellor wisely decided to end it. 'We will meet soon to carry on this discussion', he told everyone. 'This meeting is postponed.'

With that he walked quickly out of the room without looking at anyone. No one followed him. But the small groups were already forming and discussing about what had happened.

The next morning everyone was talking about the confrontation between the Chancellor and the Dean. They had all seen it coming but no one realized it would be so explosive. The Chancellor was a bit late in coming in to work that morning and he sent for his secretary. ‘Ask Dr. Pai to see me immediately,’ he told her. It was his intention to settle the matter once and for all. She went out but came back after 15 minutes.

‘Did you meet Dr. Pai?’ asked the Chancellor irritably.

‘No sir and I cannot find her anywhere’, came the reply. ‘No one seems to have seen her this morning. She is not in the library either. I have checked everywhere.’

Dr. Mathias looked very annoyed but said nothing. As was his usual practice, he then opened his emails which was the first thing he usually did. There were around 15 new mails and he glanced at them. He stopped when he saw one of them was from Dr. Pai and opened it. He read the mail with growing apprehension and dismay.

‘Dear Dr. Mathias

This is to tell the Board of Governors and yourself that I have resigned from the position of Dean with immediate effect. I am forsaking one month’s salary in lieu of notice. I wish the university all the best in spite of your plans. I will not be coming to the Business school again.

Yours sincerely

Dr. Praveena Pai’

The Chancellor kept on staring at the mail till the morning’s cup of coffee arrived. The bearer of the cup of coffee thought that the Chancellor looked a bit stunned and told those he met of how the Chancellor seemed to be a bit sick that morning.

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Appendix A

(The four paragraphs comprising this section are from an article originally published on The World Bank’s Education for Global Development blog on 23 December 2015).

It is beyond doubt that rankings have become a significant part of the tertiary education landscape, both globally and locally.

In this landscape, rankings have risen in importance and proliferated in unimaginable ways. It’s become commercialized and, with it, so has the sophistication of companies and organizations that rank colleges and universities. Undoubtedly, rankings now play such a big role in shaping the opinions of current and potential students, parents, employers, and government about the quality of tertiary education institutions.

The emergence of this rankings obsession is, at the same time, a legitimate source of concern about its misuse, especially when it is used solely for promotional purposes, or, even worse, when it becomes the main driver of policy decisions for governments and tertiary education institutions. Nowadays, it is common to observe entire policies and programs from governments apparently more concerned with the position in the rankings than on the relevance of their tertiary education institutions. Sometimes, this results in diverting significant amount of resources to some institutions while limiting support for others. If rankings become the end rather than the means towards better tertiary education, then this should be a matter of concern. An excessive importance given by institutional and government decision-makers on rankings may be both disturbing and alarming.

It is evident that rankings do have a value as a reference and as basis for comparison. However, they do not always serve as the best proxy of quality and relevance of tertiary education institutions. It has also to be kept in mind that any ranking is eventually an arbitrary arrangement of indicators aimed at labelling what it is being pre-defined by the ranker as a “good” educational institution.
