Scenarios: Dealing with difficult people or having difficult conversations in academia.

John Canning

1. David Kasey is a Senior Lecturer who has been at the University of Margate since 1979. He was fairly productive for most of his career, but his research output has declined in the past 10 years. He just about did enough to be submitted to the 2008 RAE (under a previous Head of Department), but as you knew he was due to turn 65 in 2011 you had assumed that he would have retired then and haven’t really pressed him concerning his publications. Now he is taking advantage of legislation which prevents him from being forced into retirement. He has only published one article since 2008 and is unlikely to produce enough for the REF. He is present in the department less and less and turns up mostly to teach classes then goes home. Nevertheless he is popular with colleagues and students and gives interesting insights at meetings.
   1. Lois Cox is the mother of three school age children. Her teaching and research performance is satisfactory (though not stellar) but her lack of availability for meetings is causing tension with other colleagues. She excuses herself from any department meeting which starts after 3pm as she needs to get home to collect her children from their child-minder. With her child care duties and commute she is rarely in the office before 10am. You have allowed her to work from home 3 days a week and all her teaching hours are packed in Monday and Tuesday from 10am to 2pm. Her husband has a high powered job in London and is not available to help with child care during the day. Colleagues feel that she is being given too many special privileges and students have complained about her lack of availability.
   2. Lewis Cox is the father of three school age children. His teaching and research performance is satisfactory (though not stellar) but his lack of availability for meetings is causing tension with other colleagues. He excuses herself from any department meeting which starts after 3pm as he needs to get home to collect his children from their child-minder. With his child care duties and commute he is rarely in the office before 10am. You have allowed him to work from home 3 days a week and all his teaching hours are packed in Monday and Tuesday from 10am to 2pm. His wife has a high powered job in London and is not available to help with child care during the day. Colleagues feel that he is being given too many special privileges and students have complained about his lack of availability.
2. Mildred France was recruited in 2010 as part of the University of Ludlow’s drive to attract world-class talent in the run up to the REF. As well as being regarded as a world-class researcher, she is also well known to students as presenter of *France on France,* a Channel 4 programme that many believe has led to an increase in the number of students wanting to study French at university. Your university and department makes the most of having such a high profile professor. However, with her TV work and successful research grant applications she is rarely on campus and has yet to teach an undergraduate class. Some second year students have contacted the Daily Mail and they are about to run an article along the lines of “We thought we were going to be taught by Mildred France, but we haven’t even seen her yet”. The newsletter has called you for a comment. You think you handled the call well, you get on well and you would like to come to her defence, but you realise there is more to being a celebrity’s line manager than you thought.
3. It is A-level results time. A potential student has failed to get the grades she requires and you are unable to admit the student. Her mother finds your telephone number and calls you directly to plead her daughter’s case. She is very irate and claims that there was a mistake with her daughter’s marks.
   1. Lecturer in Italian Gilbert Powell has just been awarded an OBE for his campaign work on behalf of the British Insect and Arachnid Protection Society. The problem is that Gilbert seems to have little time for work doing the absolute minimum necessary. He has published little in recent years and is now on a teaching-only contract. He always fulfils his obligations in terms of attending meetings and being on committees. He gets good teaching evaluations, but he frustrates you as you know he could be a really successful academic if he put his energies into it rather than insects and arachnids.
   2. Lecturer in Italian Gilbert Powell has just been awarded an OBE for his campaign work on behalf of the Anglo-American Burma/ Myanmar Human Rights Association. The problem is that Gilbert seems to have little time for work doing the absolute minimum necessary. He has published little in recent years and is now on a teaching-only contract. He always fulfils his obligations in terms of attending meetings and being on committees. He gets good teaching evaluations, but he frustrates you as you know he could be a really successful academic if he put his energies into it rather human rights in Burma.
4. Ben Nicholls is widely disliked by colleagues and students. He is rude to the department administrator, doesn’t respond to emails and just rolls his eyes in meetings. He does just about enough research wise to avoid any real concerns, but his behaviour is having a negative effect on other colleagues.
5. Lauren Giggs is a full-time second year PhD student in your department writing a thesis on Lorca. She spent the last 20 years in the banking industry where she rose to a very senior position before embarking on a career change. She refuses to attend research training and sessions on employability as she “knows that stuff already”. She kicks up a fuss about everything from office space to computer provision to upgrade procedures and her supervisor is at the end of her tether. Her academic progress has been just about satisfactory, but she has been ostracised by the other PhD students and administrative staff make every effort to avoid her. This year she started teaching an evening class in Spanish, but a third of the students dropped out in the first three weeks.
6. Billy Adams joined your department on a two year teaching fellow contract a year ago, just after he finished his PhD. Although there are no specific concerns about any aspect of his work, he appears unsettled in your town. He rents a room in a shared house near the university, but spends most weekends at his parents’ house two hours away. Although he has not caused any problems there are no colleagues he really bonds with.
7. Virginia Watson was a highly productive and well-liked academic full of energy and organising social activities for the department. Six months ago her father died suddenly. After a short period of personal leave she came back to work. Now she is distant, quiet and seems to be very disorganised, forgetting to perform routine tasks. She says that she is Ok, but you are sure that she is suffering from depression.
8. This academic year you needed a French language tutor at the last minute. You appointed Murielle Tremblay a native of the Gaspésie region of Quebec who trained as an English teacher in Canada, who lives in your town. Her English is excellent, but the three other tutors (all from Metropolitan France) struggle to understand her accent when she speaks French. They come to you as a group to express their concerns about student learning (the term hasn’t started yet).
9. The university has recently re-structured and your new line manager is the Dean of Arts, Business and Communications. Until six months ago he was a Vice-Dean at the privately run Samuel Smiles School of International Business in Aldershot. All his communications to staff by e-mail and in meetings focus on matters relating to the business part of the faculty. He hasn’t really said very much about the non-business aspects of the faculty including modern languages.