

What To Do?

Mr. Stan Garcia, principal of Los Olmos Middle School, is beside himself. A couple of his teachers just won't become part of the team. The trouble is that they are two of the better teachers. Both teachers could contribute to each of their department teams and the entire faculty. They do not participate in discussions in meaningful ways, and they insist on making their contributions independently, if at all. Their actions demonstrate their reluctance to work through the committee process.

This continuing avoidance of involvement with others has begun to strain relations in department meetings, in social interactions in the lounge, and in the teachers' dining room. The self-isolation is affecting morale in the English and the mathematics departments. Mr. Garcia has worked very hard to build positive morale on the campus, therefore he is conscious of negative repercussions from the current situation. The mathematics department chair noted that Mr. Blaine refused to say much during their meetings. The chair had also conveyed to Mr. Garcia that he knew Mr. Blaine's input could be valuable, but Mr. Blaine remained silent most of the time. The department chair for English noted much the same behavior for Ms. Small.

Both Mr. Blaine and Ms. Small are in their second year of employment at Los Olmos. Both have had some prior teaching experience, and both have had other careers before entering the teaching profession. Mr. Blaine was a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Air Force, and Ms. Small was a small business owner. Perhaps this prior history has something to do with this set of predicaments.

Mr. Garcia decides to review his roster of teachers to determine if anyone on staff might relate to Mr. Blaine or Ms. Small better than he can. His notes state that there are

62 teachers employed at Los Olmos—44 females and 18 males. Of those 62, two are African American, four are Hispanic, and 56 are white. Los Olmos has two beginning teachers, 11 with 1 – 5 years of experience, 15 with 6 – 10 years of experience, 16 with 11 - 20 years of experience, and 18 with over 20 years experience. Ms. Small and Mr. Blaine are not beginning teachers but the total years of teaching experience for each of them falls within the 1-5 year range. He does not see any experienced teacher on staff who's had a first career like that of Mr. Blaine and Ms. Small. Perhaps that is part of the problem. He wonders if the more experienced teachers do not honor or respect the prior careers of these two teachers. He thinks this may be true particularly when applications from their fields are used in the classroom. Maybe they just don't understand.

He remembers the mathematics department chair coming in during Mr. Blaine's first year to tell him how pleased he was with Mr. Blaine's early contributions. His use of real-world problems and applications in his mathematics classes had the students very enthusiastic about class. However, the chair noted that some of his colleagues thought Mr. Blaine a show-off. They would sometimes interrupt and challenge him as he presented some new ideas at a department meeting. Suddenly, Mr. Blaine ceased contributing. The department chair visited with Mr. Blaine following a couple of such incidents but never got much of a response. Because Mr. Blaine had excellent results with students, the department chair had decided not to pursue the issue.

Ms. Small has no such history. Mr. Garcia does not recall that her department chair ever saying anything negative about her. Her chair has said that Ms. Small's interaction with students yielded wonderful results. Parents often sent notes about how wonderful she was with their children. The chair also observed that Ms. Small was

reticent to say much during department meetings. He attributed that to her recent arrival. He thought that she had not had time enough to make friends. It is obvious to Mr. Garcia, as Ms. Small approaches the close of her second year at Los Olmos, that she still has no friends among the faculty. Was that important, he wondered? It certainly did not seem natural.

Perhaps it was time for him to get personally involved to try to find a key to these problems. Mr. Garcia decided to have a conference with both Mr. Blaine and Ms. Small. He would start first with Mr. Blaine.

“Good Morning, Mr. Blaine. Please have a seat. Would you like some coffee?”

“No thank you Mr. Garcia. I have had my coffee allotment for the day.”

“First, I want to congratulate you on your fine work with our students. We have had nothing but glowing reports from parents, and the students seem genuinely enthusiastic about your class.”

“Thank you, Mr. Garcia.”

“Secondly, I wanted to talk to you about your lack of full participation in our team approach here at Los Olmos. We really need to have each member participate, contribute, and communicate freely. Such interaction brings about the best possible teaching-learning situation for all the students. The climate and culture develops partly through the kinds of interaction we have—teacher-to-teacher, administrator-to-teacher, teacher-to-aide, and so forth. Your department chair indicates that at one time you contributed and interacted well with your colleagues. You have ceased to do so for over a year now. Can you tell me what some of your concerns might be?”

“First, let me state quite plainly that I am doing the best that I can with my students. You just indicated in your comments that this shows. Secondly, I resent the implication that I am not contributing to the best possible teaching-learning situation for all students. I do not have a problem as far as I can see. Maybe others do because they are jealous of my success with students.”

“Is there something that I can do to encourage you or help you feel comfortable with more interaction with other team members? You have many good ideas about teaching mathematics to students this age, and I really would like others to benefit from your knowledge.”

“I do not see that the problem is mine. If you can get others to be less critical and perhaps more ready to listen to new ideas, that certainly would help. Now, I must go prepare to meet my next class.”

“Mr. Blaine, please think about this. I believe that together we may be able to build better rapport with all team members. I will talk to you later about your ideas.”

After meeting with Ms. Small, Mr. Garcia had to conclude that he had not done very well with either conference. In response to his inquiries, Ms. Small told him that she lived with her elderly, infirm mother. She did not have time to prepare presentations for other faculty, nor did she have enough energy to persuade the other teachers that they should try some of the strategies that she was finding so successful. She wanted to save all her energy for the students. Why, she questioned, should she have to help other teachers when most of them had more experience than she did. That was not her role. When Mr. Garcia had attempted to offer some alternatives that might result in Ms.

Small's planning with others, she had rejected the offer outright. Now he was not sure what he should do in either case.