CASE STUDY 8.1 THE OUTSTANDING FACULTY AWARD

Adapted from a case by David J. Cherrington, Brigham Young University

I recently served on the Outstanding Faculty Award committee for the College of Business. This award is our college’s highest honor for a faculty member, which is bestowed at a special reception ceremony. At the first meeting, our committee discussed the nomination process and decided to follow our traditional practice of inviting nominations from both the faculty and students. During the next month, we received six completed files with supporting documentation. Three of the nominations came from department chairs, two from faculty who recommended their colleagues, and one from a group of 16 graduate students.

At the second meeting, we agreed that we didn’t know the six applicants well enough to make a decision that day, so we decided that we would read the applications on our own and rank them. There was no discussion about ranking criteria; I think we assumed that we shared a common definition of the word “outstanding.”

During the third meeting, it quickly became apparent that each committee member had a different interpretation of what constitutes an “outstanding” faculty member. The discussion was polite, but we debated the extent to which this was an award for teaching, or research, or service to the college, or scholarly textbook writing, or consulting, or service to society, or some other factor. After three hours, we agreed on five criteria that we would apply to independently rate each candidate using a five-point scale.

When we reconvened the next day, our discussion was much more focused as we tried to achieve a consensus regarding how we judged each candidate on each criterion. After a lengthy discussion, we finally completed the task and averaged the ratings. The top three scores had an average rating (out of a maximum of 25) of 21, 19.5, and 18.75. I assumed the person with the highest total would receive the award. Instead, my colleagues began debating over the relevance of the five criteria that we had agreed on the previous day. Some committee members felt, in hindsight, that the criteria were incorrectly weighted or that other criteria should be considered. Although they did not actually say this, I sensed that at least two colleagues on the committee wanted the criteria or weights changed because their preferred candidate didn’t get the highest score using the existing formula. When we changed the

weights in various ways, a different candidate among the top three received the top score. The remaining three candidates received lower ratings every time. Dr. H always received the lowest score, usually around 12 on the 25-point range.

After almost two hours, the associate dean turned to one committee member and said, “Dolan, I sure would like to see Dr. H in your department receive this honor. He retires next year and this would be a great honor for him and no one has received this honor in your department recently.” Dolan agreed, “Yes, this is Dr. H’s last year with us and it would be a great way for him to go out. I’m sure he would feel very honored by this award.”

I sat there stunned at the suggestion while Dolan retold how Dr. H had been active in public service, his only real strength on our criteria. I was even more stunned when another committee member, who I think was keen to finish the meeting, said, “Well, I so move” and Dolan seconded it.

The associate dean, who was conducting the meeting, said, “Well, if the rest of you think this is a good idea, all in favor say aye.” A few members said “Aye,” and he quickly proceeded to explain what we needed to do to advertise the winner and arrange the ceremony without calling for nays.

During my conversations with other committee members over the next two weeks, I learned that everyone—including the two who said “Aye”—were as shocked as I was at our committee’s decision. I thought we made a terrible decision, and I was embarrassed to be a member of the committee. A few weeks later, we were appropriately punished when Dr. H gave a 45-minute acceptance speech that started poorly and got worse.