ENCOUNTERS

Power: a parable of leadership

"How can he do this?" Phil spat out with disgust. "This is not what I signed up for!"

"He's the dean," I offered lamely. "He has the power."

We were having lunch in the doctor's dining room, and the junior faculty members among us were bemoaning our fate. Just a month before Phil and I had started at the medical centre, the Board of Visitors had announced with great fanfare the appointment of Dr. Hans Rickhoff, an internationally renowned molecular biologist, as the fourth dean of the medical school. His recruitment, the board promised, would usher in a new era of scientific rigour and research achievement. Upon his arrival, Dean Rickhoff inaugurated his "Transforming the Future Initiative," a central component of which was a radical change in the school's promotion policy. Henceforward, he proclaimed, only faculty with more than 75% of their effort funded by grants would be considered for tenure or promotion to full professor. This meant that Phil — a full-time clinician — was no longer eligible for tenure, and that my fortunes now depended on obtaining additional funding.

"What's your take, Gyorgy?" someone at our table asked.

All heads turned toward Dr. Gyorgy Szabo, a tenured professor who came from a long line of distinguished Hungarian physicians. A huge bear of a man, he had fought the Nazis in the Resistance as a boy, survived the uprising of 1956 and immigrated to the United States to join the faculty under the sponsorship of our first dean. Remarkably, these experiences had not embittered him. Not surprisingly, they left him with a keen instinct for the vagaries of academic politics.

"Playing with tenure is dangerous game," Dr. Szabo opined. Then, turning to Phil, he added "Half-life of average dean is two years — for this one, maybe even not so much. Go do your work. When promotion time comes, good chance this dean will be gone."

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I took this advice to heart and busied myself with establishing my research program. Meanwhile, faculty responded to the "initiative" by leaving the institution in droves. Some of the most talented researchers found positions elsewhere, and many respected clinicians departed to establish a competing group practice across the street. After his first unhappy year, Phil left too. He should have waited; after two years of unrelenting faculty brain drain, the Board of Visitors met, decided that they did not want that much scientific rigour and announced that Dr. Rickhoff would be stepping down to spend more time in his laboratory. In his place, they appointed Dr. Jack Ender as the fifth dean of the medical school, promising that he was uniquely qualified to heal the wounds left by the previous administration.

Dr. Ender, a distinguished senior clinician, was beloved by his students and universally admired throughout the medical centre. He announced a "Forward Together" policy, established open office hours and restored the previous promotion policies, which extended tenure to all faculty. I was delighted to see this kinder and gentler exercise of executive power, but Dr. Szabo was worried.

"Dr. Ender is good man — but maybe too kind to be dean."

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"How can you be too kind?" I asked.

"Your President Truman said 'If you want friend in Washington, get dog.' For medical school dean, even his dog bites him. This is very hard for man used to being liked."

These proved to be prophetic words: after only 10 months as dean, Dr. Ender suffered a fatal heart attack as he worked at his desk late one night. We attended his memorial service and then returned to work. The Board of Visitors met and announced that Dr. Angelo Grillo, an expert in medical education, would be appointed as the sixth dean of the medical school, promising that he would pioneer the training of physicians for practice in the 21st century. Once installed, Dr. Grillo put forward his "Prescription for Life" plan, a complete redesign of the medical school curriculum.

"New curriculum is big gamble," observed Dr. Szabo. "Is like betting your house in Las Vegas. Win — you have two houses; lose — you are homeless."

After a year-long self-study and hundreds of committee meetings, the "Prescription for Life" curriculum was rolled out. Unfortunately, no one recognized that its systems-based design had left a major gap in teaching neuropharmacology, a topic heavily emphasized by the Board of Medical Examiners that year. Shortly after the Examiners reported that the mean score for the first-year medical school class had fallen by 12 points, the Board of Visitors met and announced that Dr. Grillo would be stepping down to spend more time with his family. After an abbreviated search, the board announced the appointment of Dr. Edward Grancher, an experienced administrator, as the seventh dean of the medical school, promising that he would establish a new era of effective management. Once on site, Dr. Grancher announced his "Millions for the Mission" campaign, an ambitious five-year fundraising effort.

By this time, I had learned not to pay too much attention to the comings and goings in the dean's office. Although my promotion was fast approaching, I had a bigger worry: my fiancée was a student at a branch of the medical school located two hours away. We coped as best we could, driving back and forth between apartments, but we planned to marry and wanted to be together during her demanding clinical rotations. I inquired at the Admissions Office about her transferring to our campus. Associate Dean of Admissions Linwood Moody, a holdover from the Rickhoff administration, was not sympathetic.

"Impossible," he curtly informed me. "We don't accept transfer students."

"But my fiancée is an excellent student, and this would let us be together."

"We make absolutely no exceptions to this policy. Last year, a student at the western branch developed a rare sarcoma and asked to transfer here so she could continue her studies while she received treatment at our cancer centre — we denied her request."

"But other branches in the University system accept transfer students."

"Well, here we don't. In fact, we don't even have a transfer application form."

"You look bad," Dr. Szabo commented the next day at lunch. I told him my sorry tale.

"Talk to Grancher," he suggested. "Explain situation."

"Why would the dean care about my problems?"

"You may think dean has great power, but truth is job comes with *tsoris*: all day long you listen to complaints, worry about money. Every time you get new idea, someone says idea is lousy; every time you make decision, you make new enemy. For most big problems dean can do nothing. But you have small problem. Small problem he can fix — and same time make a friend."

I was very dubious about Dr. Szabo's suggestion. I had tried to remain invisible to the passing parade of deans, but I had no other option. As I waited in Dean Grancher's outer office, I rehearsed my petition over and over in my mind, as if I were about to argue a capital murder case before the Supreme Court. By the time I was called in to see him, I had become so distraught that I was shaking.

Dr. Grancher beckoned me to sit down. "So, what can I do for you?"

No words came forth — my brain had frozen. "I love my wife," I finally blurted out.

Dr. Grancher grinned. "So do I. Here's a picture of her and my children."

Reassured by his warmth, I told him of our years apart, our forthcoming marriage and how our attempt at reuniting had been stymied by the school's transfer policy.

"You know, my wife and I faced a similar situation. Right after we were married I got an anesthesia residency on the east coast, while she got a coveted postdoctoral fellowship in California. For three years, we spent hundreds of dollars on phone calls, thousands on plane fares and many lonely nights. Let me see what I can do."

Cautiously hopeful, I departed to see patients in clinic. Returning to my office late that afternoon, I was taken aback to see Associate Dean Moody waiting outside my door, pacing nervously back and forth like a suitor about to plead for a maiden's hand. "Oh, thank goodness you're here!" he gushed. "I have some very important documents for you!" He pressed a large white envelope bearing the school's seal into my hands; I noticed his face was filmed with sweat. "If there's anything I can do to help — anything at all — please call my private line," he implored, backing away down the hall.

Once seated at my desk I opened the mystery envelope and extracted a sheaf of forms. It was our standard medical school application packet; however, stamped across the front page in red ink were the words "TRANSFER STUDENT."

Leaders who successfully wield power leave grand monuments visible to all, but it is the sum of their smaller acts — which we rarely see — that measures their greatness. My fiancée transferred to our campus, we married that spring, and I was promoted to associate professor with tenure. Upon my wife's graduation, she received a handwritten note from Dr. Grancher: "Congratulations, and best wishes to you and your husband for many years TOGETHER." Perhaps he had taken a special, personal interest in us, but I suspect that we were not the only beneficiaries of his grace and wisdom: Dr. Grancher's tenure as medical school dean lasted 12.8 Szabo half-lives, a longevity record that stands to this day.

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