

FORUM

University should show some grace under fire

The summary dismissal of Associate Professor Ted Steele from the University of Wollongong in February this year has done great damage to the reputation of the university. There is a widespread perception that due process was not followed. Regardless of whether Dr Steele's claims about soft marking are correct, many people believe, because of his dismissal, that there must have been something in them.

As well, the dismissal has cost a lot of money in legal fees, devoured untold effort and seriously hurt Dr Steele's career. The National Tertiary Education Union argued in the Federal Court that the dismissal violated the enterprise agreement and the judge agreed. With the decision of the university administration to appeal against this decision, it is clear the case is far from over.

What is the future likely to bring? From what I know of similar cases, more of the same - indeed far more than anyone would wish.

Over the past 20 years, I've studied numerous cases involving an individual employee versus a large organisation, including many university cases. Although the details of each case are complex and the rights and wrongs seldom clear-cut, some patterns become obvious. (Note that the following generalisations are not based on the Steele case.)

□ When the participants are persistent, the cases last a long time. Five or 10 years is not unusual.

□ The cases become increasingly complex as they proceed. Grasping the essence of the dispute becomes ever more difficult.

□ If the struggle is waged primarily through formal channels, such as grievance procedures or courts, the organisation has a great advantage in having virtually unlimited

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funds, unlimited time and little accountability. Furthermore, formal channels typically deal with technicalities; fundamental issues such as justice become secondary.

□ The impact on the individual is often incredibly damaging. Usually there are large financial costs and career interruption or termination. Also common are health problems and relationship break-ups. To survive the experience, support from family, friends and co-workers is extremely valuable.

□ Unions and professional associations often provide little or no assistance to the individual, but when they do, this makes an enormous difference.

□ Building support is usually the most effective strategy for the individual. Publicity is a crucial part of this. The organisation is hurt far worse by adverse publicity than by use of formal procedures such as courts.

□ The long-term damage to the organisation can be immense, especially through negative publicity and loss of trust.

□ The case sends a signal to other employees to keep quiet, causing a loss of organisational vibrancy.

Now back to the Steele case. If it follows the typical pattern, the prognosis is for a lengthy, costly and damaging future for everyone concerned.

There are a few escape routes from this tragic pattern. I'd like to mention one of my favourites. Public relations gurus now often recommend to corporations that come under attack to "embrace their problems". For example, if a running shoe manufacturer is seriously attacked - rightly or wrongly - for exploitation of Third World workers, denial and stonewalling only prolong the bad publicity. A more astute response is to accept the organisation is forever linked with the (alleged) problem, take energetic steps to rectify the (alleged) problem and to make a name for itself as a leading reformer.

Via the Steele case, the University of Wollongong is now associated worldwide - rightly or wrongly - with denial of academic freedom. This could be turned around by admitting matters had not been handled well, reinstating Dr Steele, setting up an open and independent inquiry into marking procedures and standards, and thereby becoming known as a university that is able to learn from mistakes, is open to criticism and is a haven for dissent.

Wishful thinking? By all past experience, certainly. But I think it is the only obvious way to turn a disaster into an asset for the university.

For those elsewhere: learn from the mistakes of others. Wollongong University is not alone in its agony, only currently the most prominent.