



Case Study: Besieged by Complaints

You are now the head of a large unit in which you have been a faculty member for many years. Until you became head, you were not fully aware of the problems with one of your colleagues, Professor Choler. Now you feel besieged by complaints from staff members about his treatment of them.

You remember, over the years, having received Choler's periodic email messages— sent to the whole department— complaining about one matter or another, but since most of them didn't affect you directly, you paid little attention. You also knew that Choler could be unpleasant at faculty meetings, but he didn't attend very often, and most of his complaints were ruled out of order.

Now, however, both the messages and the conduct at faculty meetings have become your business. In his typical email message, Choler describes a problem, personalizes the fault to a single individual, and recommends a solution that usually involves humiliation, if not discipline, for that person. The people he targets (or, in some cases, their union representatives) are the ones complaining to you and demanding that you take action. In addition, a few faculty members have asked you to "get this email thing under control" because they don't want to be bothered by any more of his messages.

At meetings Choler uses the same general tactic, usually going out after a particular person with strong language and in a loud voice. This makes some people so uncomfortable that they will not attend if they see him in the room. His victims have been known to leave meetings shaking, or even in tears, after his verbal assaults.

Reviewing the collection of email messages, plus other letters Choler sent to your predecessor, you have noticed a pattern to the situations. Generally he identifies a real problem. For example, his complaint about cumbersome and slow processing of travel vouchers was accurate, but his assignment of blame to a clerk in the business office was (in your opinion, and according to the clerk and her union steward) disproportionate to the problem and her role in processing vouchers. Once Professor Choler picks a target, he rarely lets up until that person leaves the department.

There is no evidence in the files that anyone has ever spoken to Professor Choler about his email tirades or his conduct in meetings.

What are the issues?

What steps should you take?

