

Case Study 2:

You are a new administrator and have responsibility for a unit over-seeing student leadership opportunities, social justice retreat, and volunteer opportunities. You feel like you are gaining a good sense of your team and their individual styles and have been observing group and individual dynamics. You have had multiple one-on-one meetings with each of the staff and feel that overall good work is being done on behalf of the students. You feel confident in your relationships. Based on these meetings and your observations you notice other dynamics as well: Erica is a program coordinator and is a cisgender, heterosexual, African American woman. She has been in her position for 1.5 years fulltime, previously worked in the center as an undergraduate. She shared that she doesn't feel supported in the office, and the support for students is rooted in whiteness. You have challenged her to think about why she took the position and how she can shift the narrative, but she spends a lot of time mentoring students and doesn't feel as if she has the time to do larger scale work. Erin is a program coordinator and a cisgender, queer, white woman who has been in her role for four years. She feels like she is expected to do more work than Erica, and that Erica often gets a pass for doing substandard work. She complains to you about her during your weekly meetings. The other members of the team are Rob and Marisol. Rob is biracial, cisgender, heterosexual man and uses a hearing device. He has been in his role for five months and is the only person hired by you. He serves in the program coordinator role. Marisol is a graduate assistant. She is gender-nonconforming, Latinx woman, been in the role for one month and was selected prior to your arrival.

During staff meetings, there is a lot of silence when team members ask for input and an avoidance to work together. There is also a limited relationship between Erica and Erin. Jennifer served the interim director for close to a year and is a cisgender, lesbian, white woman, has been in her position for four years. Jennifer is conflict adverse and confirms that some of these tensions have been in place, and that she finds Erica to be intimidating, so she avoided addressing concerns. Jennifer does not feel it was her place to address a "personal conflict." "You plan a retreat for your team to do some team building and long-term vision setting. During the morning you all focus on more personal sharing of stories. Everyone seemed comfortable sharing and talking about most of their identities as it relates to themselves and supporting students. You think that this has set a solid foundation to dig into work as a team for the afternoon. During lunch you notice that Erica and Erin seem to mostly avoid each other but don't think too much of it. As you shift into the afternoon session and begin mapping out everyone's roles and responsibilities, Erin gets upset by some of the tasks listed because she is tired of doing programs that are mostly for white students. You share that everything being listed is from the position descriptions that correspond with job duties, and that it is a way for the team to gain a better collective understanding. Erica interjects that Erin's programs are with mostly white students because she is white, and that's all the students she recruits. Simultaneously, Rob is enthusiastic and volunteers to take on some of the tasks that Erin is complaining about. Marisol also jumps at the chance. Erica interjects and tells Rob and Marisol to not let Erin dump work she doesn't want to do onto them. Next thing you know Jennifer is coming to Erin's rescue and saying that she has been assigned a lot of extra work prior to your arrival, and that Erin hasn't had time to recruit Students of Color. As the back and forth between Erica and Erin continues, you observe Marisol visibly begin to shut down and withdraw. Rob again interjects with experience he's had at a previous campus on how maybe the team could recruit more diverse students.

Erica says, “that all sounds great, but will never happen if Erin is the point person.” On that note, you realize that you need to take a break, regroup, and figure out next steps.

KEY QUESTIONS

1. What type of communication power dynamics are occurring (low power/high power, high power/high power, etc.) and how are they impacting team relationships and functioning?
2. How can power be named and neutralized based on identity and hierarchy?
3. As a new supervisor, what ideas do you have to continue to build the team and share power

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Robert Brown, et al. *Identity-Conscious Supervision in Student Affairs : Building Relationships and Transforming Systems*. Routledge, 2020.