

## **Dealing with a Difficult Colleague: The Intriguing Case of Professor Zahir**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Colleges and Universities are bureaucratic institutions that involve a myriad of documentation and adherence to procedures for sometimes even minuscule requests or tasks. This adherence to documentation and procedures in bureaucratic environments such as universities is reflected in this case involving a business department faculty member. This faculty member made many serious allegations against other faculty members and a student. This case is based on a few incidents at a high-ranking university in Brandelia, a country in Asia. This case encompasses the topics of ethics, the impact of technological changes, stress, employee mental health, policies, procedures, and disciplinary actions.

Keywords: Ethics, morale, employee mental health, disciplinary action, university.

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## INTRODUCTION

"He hit me. He has hit a professor", – Professor Zahir was screaming in the corridor in front of his office. It was a busy day for the business department as the semester final examinations were going on, and almost all the faculty members and the students were present. Faculty and students were moving through the corridors on their way to their next exam. Everyone passing by was not paying much attention. Though it may seem unusual to many that no one was paying attention to Dr. Zahir's allegation, it was not unusual in the business administration department, given the history of this Professor. Allegations made by Dr. Zahir are not something new in the department. Dr. Zahir had made many false allegations against staff members and other faculty. However, he made his previous allegations mostly in faculty meetings, and this time it was in a publicly shared space.

## BACKGROUND OF UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONS IN BRANDELIA

Currently, this Asian country of 169 million has six streams of higher education: (i) The National University system with more than 2200 colleges, which enrolls 60.23% of all students in higher education; (ii) Public universities, which enroll 14.78% of all students; and (iii) Islamic Arabic University, which enrolls 5.46 percent of all students; (iv) Colleges affiliated with public universities that enroll 4.32% of all students; and (v) Private university, which enrolls 6.36% of all students. In addition, (vi) Brandelia Open University offers a different stream that makes up 8.84% of all enrollments (University Grants Commission, 2021).

The University Grants Commission (UGC) is the topmost organization managing higher education in Brandelia. Per its data for 2021, enrollment in public institutions of higher education was over 4.8 million despite budgetary challenges. Private universities were established consistent with the *Private University Act of 1992* guidelines. This legislation, by the parliament in 1992, provided an alternative to the flow of students to overseas universities. Even though a few private universities have good infrastructure, their budgetary allocation is more than that of public universities. For many years the country lacked an accreditation organization that could ensure the universities in the nation are on par with global standards. The country passed the *Brandelia Accreditation Council Act of 2017*, which brought about the autonomous government agency known as the Accreditation Council, which accredits higher education institutions to provide quality education to meet international standards.

The National University System of Brandelia, which is separate from public and private universities, had (according to data from 2017) 2249 affiliated and incorporated colleges (of which, 275 are government and 1974 are non-government colleges). Among these, 770+ have a Bachelor's with Honors program only, 145 have both Master's degree and terminal programs, and 123 are for female students only. The government plans to convert the more prominent affiliated colleges of the National University into public universities, particularly those located in the district headquarters where there are no public universities.

Students with 12 years of education can apply to a university. Each university has its own admissions test, which means a student must take these specific admissions exams with every university they wish to apply to. Only 14% of students who have completed 12 years of education are admitted to a higher education institution.

## THE IMPOSING COLLEAGUE

Professor Zahir is a senior faculty in the Department of Business at the University of Baramula – a public university in Brandelia. The university campus is sprawled on around 700 acres of land, and all students must stay in one of the residential dorms. The teacher-to-student ratio in this university is 1:20, according to the 48th annual report of 2021 of the University Grants Commission. Professor Zahir's obnoxious character was revealed from the first day he joined the department because of his obscene boasting about himself and talking objectionably low about almost everyone else. His colleagues were shocked, but except for a few occasions, no one protested because of his forceful character. Over time, all except one of his colleagues, who were present when he joined the university, left, and many new colleagues joined the department over the years. Now the department has about 20 faculty, from the ranking of Lecturers to Full Professor, with him being the highest-ranked Professor. The colleague that joined the department before Dr. Zahir became a Full Professor after him. Using Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, Brandelia has a high-power distance culture (Hofstede, 1980), where seniority is highly respected.

Professor Zahir did not stop screaming in the corridor on that day. He later went to the head of the department and complained about an MBA student hitting him in the corridor. According to Dr. Zahir, the student had hit him because he refused to give the student a passing grade due to the student's "unacceptable" performance. The head of the department discussed with other faculty members and formed an inquiry committee based on their recommendations.

The committee met several times, and fortunately, surveillance cameras were installed in the corridor, making the investigation straightforward for them to determine what happened. Upon scrutinizing the footage from the cameras, the committee found the allegations baseless. The inquiry committee shared this finding during the next departmental meeting. The investigation results made the faculty members furious, and they strongly reacted to the "falsehood" concerning such a serious allegation and decided to discipline Professor Zahir. Surprisingly, Professor Zahir turned very polite and came to the department with a "medical certificate," which stated that he had been suffering from schizophrenia and requested everyone to consider his case with pity. The department had a culture of being very lenient with the faculty members and was usually reluctant to take harsh disciplinary action against any faculty members. So, the decision to take disciplinary action against Professor Zahir was abandoned.

The following year, Professor Zahir displayed a sober and polite character in his interactions with his colleagues. Although there were some informal complaints from the students on how he conducts classes and gives exams randomly, the faculty members did not want to get seriously involved with that issue. Perhaps he got the impression that the other faculty members were afraid of him because he was the department's highest-ranked faculty member.

Then there was the emergence of COVID-19. Like the rest of the world, the department was closed for in-person classes for Spring 2020. There were no classes, neither in traditional format nor online, as there was no approval from the central authority of the university. In April 2020, 4 months after the university's closure, the central authority of the university approved online course delivery. Immediately, the department started delivering courses online, and Professor Zahir was also assigned courses to teach.

The rest of the year went by peacefully. In 2021, to everyone's surprise, Professor Zahir began posting inflammatory comments on Facebook. Initially, his posts were defamatory against

the government officials and authorities of other universities in his professional network. The department's faculty members felt embarrassed by the objectionable comments from one of their colleagues on a public platform. They discussed this briefly in the online academic committee meetings. Most faculty members initially felt his allegations were preposterous and ignored his actions. But considering the country's law, some of his comments were subject to judicial actions. His comments were full of personal attacks and sometimes vulgar against ministers, government officials, supreme court judges, religious norms, and others. An example of his comments regarding a leading female activist in the country was – *"Her voice and body both are soft like a moist cake but poisonous."*

The complacency of the department's faculty members did not last long. Soon, Dr. Zahir's comments focused on criticizing the department. He was now attacking administrators and almost all faculty members. Some of his comments included – *"I requested the formation of an examination committee for one of my Ph.D. students, but both the examination office and the external examiners asked for bribes"; "That National Professor is stupid. What a shame for the nation"; "The dean of the university has stolen my money"; "None of the department's faculty members can teach. They are teaching incorrectly"; "Professors X and Y (of the department) know nothing." Etc.*

As a result, the department's faculty members became more concerned and met formally. However, after heated discussions, they decided not to take any action. One of the major factors for this decision was the university's culture. The university's senior faculty rely on their colleagues' votes to run for posts like the Vice-Chancellor, Dean, etc. They were also reluctant to take any action against other faculty due to connections with different political groups, which can influence election results.

Professor Zahir was unrelenting and expanding his targets. One day, he posted an accusation against another senior faculty member for stealing his work to use in an academic publication. He posted this on his personal Facebook page and the university faculty's Facebook page. This time, the faculty members of the department were mortified. They met several times, had a brief internal inquiry into the allegation, and found the accusation baseless. The faculty met with the Vice-Chancellor to discuss this issue. The Vice-chancellor patiently and empathically listened to the faculty members; however, he did not commit to taking any action against Professor Zahir.

The faculty members returned to the department disheartened and held a meeting to discuss the issue further. They were colleagues from other departments who inquired about the accusation by Professor Zahir. University alumni also made inquiries about this issue, which also affected the morale of the current students. The faculty members (except Professor Zahir) posted a joint message on the department's Facebook page. Part of this message stated – *"Our attention was drawn to the accusation by Professor Zahir. We all inquired about the issue and found the accusation incorrect. The accusation expressed by Dr. Zahir is his opinion and does not reflect the opinions of the department faculty. Please bear in mind that future remarks made by Dr. Zahir are not representative of the department's views. The message mitigated the community's perception of the alleged plagiarism by a department member. Professor Zahir retaliated on Facebook by denouncing the department's message and continued his attack against other faculty members, but the faculty members decided to ignore all communications from Professor Zahir."*

## EPILOGUE

After months of heightened stress and unrest within the department, Professor Zahir abruptly stopped posting on Facebook. He emailed a leave of absence application asking for leave due to 'mental fatigue.' however, he neither apologized nor alluded to his prior allegations. The department forwarded his leave application to the central authority of the university. More than a year has passed, and there has been no communication from Professor Zahir. He continues to be absent from the department and has not been assigned any responsibilities. He remains on the university's payroll due to the culture of all public universities in the country. Dismissing a tenured faculty member from a public university is cumbersome and often requires the intervention of the Supreme Court of Brandelia. The unrest settled since Dr. Zahir's leave of absence, and the department's environment has been tranquil.

Note: This case is about a department in the field of business administration at a leading public university. The case is based on actual incidents, but the name of the country, university, and antagonist was changed for anonymity. The department is 30 years old and enjoys a high status and reputation due to its rigorous teaching and the esteemed employment of its graduates at home and abroad.

## QUESTIONS

1. What is the impact on morale when a professor obscenely boasts about themselves and puts down other faculty members? Name two of the Big Five personality traits you believe Professor Zahir exhibits the most and two he exhibits the least.
2. Which of the three personalities in the Dark triad (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, Psychopathy) best relate(s) with Prof. Zahir's behavior in this case?
3. Emotional intelligence has four dimensions (Self-Awareness, Social-Awareness, Self-Management, and Relationship Management). Which dimensions does Prof. Zahir need to work on to improve his Emotional Intelligence?
4. Do you agree with no disciplinary action for the false allegations of assault, given that a medical certificate was presented? Why? What can organizations do better to manage their employees' mental well-being and health?
5. What policies or procedures should organizations have to minimize an employee going on a public forum and making offensive personal attacks against other employees? Should an investigation and possible disciplinary action occur regarding Professor Zahir's allegations of bribery and theft? Offer some guidelines for making an ethical management decision in this scenario.
6. Utilizing Hershey and Blanchard's situational model of leadership, what approach would you recommend if a committee is formed to investigate the numerous false allegations by Professor Zahir? After the investigations of the allegations of plagiarism were found to be baseless, what disciplinary actions would you recommend?
7. Given the increased stress these investigations caused, what services should be offered to all the parties involved to cope? The COVID-19 Global pandemic ushered in workplace changes, reducing face-to-face interactions. Technological advancements have sometimes been described as a double-edged sword for many organizations. What does this mean?

Give some examples apart from those in the case above.

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