

MARLA RULES*

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Abstract

Assistant high school principal Elise Abbott is disturbed by the autocratic decision-making of the interim principal Marla Richardson. She meets with Marla to discuss Marla's approval of the English department chair's removal of master teacher Alice Tremont from gifted/talented courses. The chair reassigned the courses to herself. Although the department chairs are supervised by the principal, the English department teachers are supervised by Elise. Prior to being named interim principal, Marla had been an assistant principal. She and Elise had both been selected as assistant principals two years earlier. Both of them had taught for years in the English department. Until Elise became an assistant principal, she had been the English department chair. This case is designed to provoke student discussion about power, decision-making, and the relationships among school personnel. Students are encouraged to reflect on their own assumptions about power and leadership as they consider the conduct of the assistant principal and principal.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of the Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

"I've told you my decision, Elise. Alice Tremont will teach five sections of ninth grade English. I'm the principal at Russell High School, and that is what I think is best," Marla Richards proclaimed grandly as she glared at assistant principal Elise Abbott.

Elise, who sat a short distance away on the other side of Marla's executive oak desk, took a deep breath. She had made an appointment to speak to Marla, and she wanted Marla to hear her out. "But Alice has done a superb job with the ninth and twelfth grade gifted and talented classes, I don't see..."

Marla held up her hand as if to silence Elise. "That's enough, Elise. I know just as much about Alice's career as you do. Alice has taught those courses long enough. She is needed elsewhere. Rhonda is the department chair now, not you.

You gave up that position two years ago when you and I moved into administration as assistant principals here. Rhonda has the power to schedule those courses for herself for next year, and she has my support. Frankly I think Rhonda will bring some much needed change to the g/t classes."

*Version 1.1: Dec 11, 2006 10:17 am +0000

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“Rhonda certainly will bring change to those classes,” Elise retorted in a tone that sounded more sarcastic than she had meant. She leaned forward in her chair and tried to remain calm as she continued in a more controlled voice. “Alice has taught those gifted and talented courses for ten years. The students respect her and so do their parents.”

Marla began sifting through the phone messages and mail stacked on her desk. She looked up to comment in a dismissive tone, “Elise, you don’t seem to be listening. There is nothing to discuss. My decision has been made.”

“You still have time to reconsider that decision . . .or was the idea to move Alice your decision from the start?” Elise sat back to consider what she had just realized.

Marla slapped a thick manila envelope on the desk and raised her narrowed eyes to face Elise. “That really is enough, Elise. I don’t have time for your accusations. Rhonda can teach the g/t students as well as Alice can. You need to be more open to change and new possibilities. Just because the English department doesn’t look like it did when you were chair, doesn’t make you right and Rhonda wrong!”

Elise’s hands lay clenched in her lap as she responded wearily, “Come on, Marla. Removing Alice is absurd. We both taught in the English department with Rhonda for years. Her autocratic style of teaching is hardly suited to the creative and questioning students in g/t classes. The students and their parents not going to be happy to learn that their Mrs. Tremont has been banished and replaced by Queen Rhonda.”

“Banished? You’re being absurd, Elise.” Marla paused momentarily to stare at Elise in an intimidating manner. “Furthermore I don’t appreciate your attitude. You’ve come into my office and started criticizing my decisions. My job is hard enough without my own assistant principal trying to undermine me.”

Elise sighed with exasperation. “Now who’s being absurd? Just because I am asking you to reconsider your decision doesn’t mean that I’m criticizing you. I want what is best for the students and the school. And I don’t think that Rhonda Baker was acting in a way that was beneficial to them when she removed Alice and assigned those courses to herself for next fall. Sure, as department chair Rhonda has the responsibility for assigning teachers to classes, but with authority comes accountability. Her action is arbitrary and vindictive. She has hated the recognition that Alice has received over the years for the activities she has created for her g/t courses, her conference presentations, and her grants.” Elise paused for effect. “And it seems like she wasn’t the only one who felt that way about Alice!”

Marla pushed her chair back from the desk and appeared ready to rise. “I don’t know why I am even sitting here listening to this. This really is none of your business, Elise,” she warned. “You don’t supervise the department chairs or create the master schedule. Those are my responsibilities, not yours.”

Elise leaned forward, hands now folded together in her lap. “I’m not trying to usurp your power, Marla. But I supervise Alice,” Elise noted firmly. “You assigned me to supervise and evaluate the English teachers except for Rhonda, since she is the department chair. I understand that Rhonda is only answerable to you. But Alice came to me about the unexpected change in her schedule for next year. She’d already met repeatedly with Rhonda about the switch, and Rhonda wasn’t budging. She told Alice that no changes to the schedule could be made without your approval.”

“At least Rhonda understands what it means to be a team player, Elise,” Marla barked. “You, however, appear to be having trouble grasping the concept of team. You seem to forget that you are part of my team. I don’t answer to you. I don’t have to explain my decisions to you. As a team member you’re expected to support my decisions.”

“Marla, how could you and I have been in the same educational administration cohort at Grant University? That’s not what I learned about being part of a team. I thought team meant that the members address problems and issues together by gathering data and exploring options. And input into decision-making isn’t just limited to administrators. The entire school community can serve as a resource in reaching decisions that provide optimal learning opportunities for all students,” Elise concluded confidently.

“When we were in that cohort, you were just a student. Elise. What makes you think you can lecture me now as if you were a professor?” Marla retorted arrogantly.

Elise sighed in exasperation. “I’m just trying to suggest that there are other ways to view my comments than as an attack on you or a refusal to be team-spirited!”

“Your problem, Elise, is that you have never forgiven me for being chosen principal over you. You just

can't accept that when Joe Fields left, the superintendent selected me, not you as principal of this school," Marla gloated.

Elise replied in a steady voice, " Nobody selected you as principal, not yet anyway. You're the acting principal. And there's a very good reason I wasn't named acting principal. I didn't apply." Elise sat up even straighter in her chair. "Marla, I've worked with you for ten years now, and I know your victim routine. You aren't the victim here. If anybody is a victim, it's poor Alice."

"You are completely out of line. This conversation is going nowhere, Elise"

Marla snarled as she focused her attention on a phone message.

Elise persisted. "Why is that? All three of us, you, me and Alice started out as English teachers the same year here at Russell High. We worked in the same department with Alice until you and I became assistant principals. We're your colleagues, Marla. We're not pawns to be manipulated or subordinates to be intimidated into silence."

"How dare you speak to me this way!" Marla fumed.

"Because I care about this organization. The people who work here are my friends..."

"Oh, and they're not mine? Is that what you are saying? You really are totally out of line, Elise. This conversation is over and it will not recommence," Marla announced as she rose from the chair behind her desk.

Elise took her time getting to her feet and sidling towards the office door, all the while keeping her eyes on Marla, whose face was the reddest that Elise had ever seen it.

Elise paused just before she reached the doorway and addressed Marla. "Of course, you can do exactly what you want to Alice and to me for that matter, but why is it so important to you to be able to wield power over people and to impose your will on them? That's not what leadership is about. Leadership is about working with people and creating a culture in which they can grow. Leadership is about building trust and engaging in conversation."

"I have heard all I care to hear about your theories of leadership. I am the principal here, not you. Alice Tremont will teach the courses I say she'll teach. It's up to me to decide what's best. This is my school. If you can't remember that, Elise, then maybe you should go find yourself another school," Marla barked.

"You really see me as a rival and a threat, don't you? But I'm not. I don't want to be principal here, or anywhere else right now. I just want to continue on as an assistant principal who is allowed to do her job. This is a good school, Marla. I don't want it to be destroyed by a woman who wants to make it her personal fief."

"Elise, how many times do I have to tell you that this conversation has ended?" Marla hissed. "If you say anything more to me on this subject, I'm going to put a letter of reprimand for insubordination in your file. You seem to have completely forgotten who you're speaking to."

For the first time since the conversation had begun, Elise thought she saw Marla smile faintly.

"O.K., Marla. I'm going. But I assure you I haven't forgotten to whom I'm speaking!" Elise turned and exited before Marla could say anything more.

As Elise passed Marla's secretary on the way out of the main office, the woman became a flurry of activity. No doubt making up for the time she had spent trying to listen to the conversation in her boss's office. If Phyllis had heard anything, it would soon be working its way through the entire faculty.

Elise trudged wearily down the hall that led to the parking lot. Fortunately the day was over and Elise could go home and mull over her interaction with Marla. She hadn't gone into Marla's office with the intention of saying any of the things she had said. She didn't know whether to congratulate herself for finally having the courage to talk back to Marla or to start thinking about packing up her office in anticipation of her return to the classroom. She had tenure as a teacher. She wasn't going to be jobless.

Somehow this episode about Alice's schedule had just triggered something inside Elise that had been waiting to explode ever since she became an assistant principal. She hated the power imbalance between administrators and teachers. Why were administrators who had once been teachers themselves so ready to trample on their colleagues who remained in classrooms? They needed to work together to make schools better.

None of her educational administration courses had taught her how to deal with abusive principals. She had been so happy when Joe Fields left. He had created a toxic climate in the school by playing people off against each other in order to maintain his power and control over them. Now Marla seemed obsessed about control and power and making sure everyone else knew who had the authority.

Elise had increasingly begun to wonder if she belonged in administration. She wanted to help create a learning community. How could she do that with principals like Joe and Marla? And she definitely didn't want to become like them, always kowtowing to those above her and stepping on those below her.

Elise saw Marla as craving power, and that need made her exactly the sort of person who should be kept from power. Marla didn't understand the responsibility or accountability that went with power.

By the time she reached her car, Elise's slight feeling of jubilation after telling Marla what she had long wanted to say to her had faded. At least it was Friday, and she would have the weekend to reassess her future as an administrator. Maybe administration just wasn't for people like her.

TEACHING NOTES

Assistant high school principal Elise Abbott is disturbed by the autocratic decision-making of the interim principal Marla Richardson. She meets with Marla to discuss Marla's approval of the English department chair's removal of master teacher Alice Tremont from gifted/talented courses. The chair reassigned the courses to herself. Although the department chairs are supervised by the principal, the English department teachers are supervised by Elise.

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Discussion Questions

1. What was your reaction to the conversation between Marla and Elise before it was revealed that both of them had been English teachers in the same department and also had worked together as assistant principals? What was your reaction after you had this additional information? Did your view about Elise's conduct change?
2. How old did you assume Marla and Elise to be? What does each of them look like? Compare your responses with your classmates and discuss the possible explanations for differences in your assumptions.
3. Do you prefer the leadership style demonstrated by Elise or Marla? How would you characterize their styles? Are both styles equally acceptable in schools?
4. What do you think was the dominant issue in this case? What did you focus on when you read it? For instance, were you more focused on Rhonda and Marla's arbitrary use of power, Elise's questioning of Marla's decision and the manner in which she did that, or perhaps the rationale for the assignment of teachers to courses?
5. Are there alternative ways in which Elise could have handled her concerns about the English department schedule?
6. Who has more political skill, Marla or Elise? How important are political skills for administrators? What are they and how can they be learned?
7. Have you encountered an administrator's arbitrary use of power over a teacher? How did that conduct affect faculty morale, school climate, and learning opportunities for students?
8. What processes should be used in scheduling and assignment of teachers? Who should select those procedures?
9. What do you think Alice's feelings were when she was reassigned? Were those feelings discounted by Marla?
10. Are gender issues involved in this case? If so, what are they?

11. Should Elise report Marla's decision about Alice to the superintendent in an effort to prevent Marla from being named principal permanently? If yes, how do you think the superintendent will react?
12. Should the same administrator supervise the chair as well as the teachers in a department? What are the political advantages and disadvantages to this approach to supervision to that administrator? To the school as an organization?
13. Describe the use of power by administrators in your school and district. Do these behaviors have positive or negative effects on the school and on the district?
14. Did Elise behave ethically? Did Marla behave ethically? Justify your position.
15. What are your predictions about Elise's and Marla's futures in school administration? Will Marla become principal? Will Elise remain an assistant principal?
16. Describe the ideal relationship between a principal and an assistant principal? Describe the communication strategies each administrator would use to achieve that ideal relationship.
17. What should be the role of an interim principal?

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