

Case 23

WHO'S MAKING THE DECISIONS AT LIVINGSTON UNIVERSITY?

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Learning Objectives

- To better understand the complexities of teamwork.
- To recognize how position and power can influence group interactions.
- To demonstrate the need for effective communication in achieving group outcomes.

BACKGROUND ON LIVINGSTON UNIVERSITY

The Organization

Livingston University is a leading technological university with an emphasis on research. It has a total enrollment of 2,150 undergraduate and 3,500 graduate students with about 250 full-time faculty. Its broad-based curriculum focuses on entrepreneurialism and cross-disciplinary research, contributing to its excellent reputation for which it has been cited by several nationally recognized ranking entities. Livingston also makes considerable effort to develop collaborative partnerships, both externally between and among businesses, government, and other universities, as well as internally across departments, in an effort to enhance the learning environment of the school for students and faculty.

Decision to Redesign the Website

As a result of increasing competition among institutions of higher education to attract and retain students, Livingston decided to undertake a rebranding campaign to better position itself among its peers. One area needing immediate attention was the school website.

Even prior to the implementation of a formal Web Redesign Committee, there was consensus across multiple department and divisions of the school that the website was uninviting and ineffective, which was supported by feedback from potential students. Thus with the approval and support of the Office of the President of the university, the responsibility both for hiring a consultant and putting together a redesign committee fell to the director of communications. The director, Byron Bailyn, identified 14 departments and key individuals from throughout the university to participate on the committee to ensure participation and representation.

Although resolving the issues associated with the website was Byron's defined problem, he knew there was more at stake. Implicit in his direction from the university president, Nora Scottie, Byron understood that this group was expected to model the spirit of collaboration that Livingston considered a foundational element to its image and reputation. The outcome of this group would be closely monitored as a benchmark for future endeavors. Byron knew that he had his work cut out for him.

The Web Redesign Committee

Byron looked at the clock and saw that he had 15 minutes before his meeting with the university's president, Nora Scottie. He felt the beginning of a migraine as he wondered how it had gotten to this point. Less than a year ago, Byron was flattered and excited to be selected by President Scottie to lead a new branding initiative. The goal was to update the image of Livingston University to attract new students and faculty, and the first step was to give the website a much needed overhaul. As he gathered his notes and thought back to the energy and enthusiasm of those first few committee meetings last April, he wondered how things had gotten out of hand.

The Web Redesign Committee had started off well, with an enthusiastic group of diverse participants representing 14 different departments throughout the university. This included people from each of the three schools within the university (business, humanities, and engineering), the admissions department, library, information technology, student life, finance office, office of development, and the communications office. Byron was pleased that 25 people came to the first meeting, and although attendance dropped off a bit as the meetings continued as was expected, he thought that the core group of 15 or so people from at least 10 different departments provided a good range of representation.

With this level of support from people with such various backgrounds, Byron was eager to address the group's task and optimistic about the outcome. At the same time he was nervous about the process that lay before him. Although the group's specific task was the redesign of the website, President Scottie made it clear to Byron that more was at stake. A unique aspect of Livingston's mission was the development of a heavily interdisciplinary curriculum. The long-term goal was that students would not only take complementary courses across departments and schools within Livingston, but also benefit from workshops or other experiential learning experiences in conjunction with

administrative offices such as communications, public relations, and information technology to better prepare the students for postgraduation careers. It was made clear to Byron that this committee was being viewed as an unofficial model to demonstrate the value and effectiveness of universitywide collaboration in decision making before making any drastic changes to the curriculum that might backfire. As President Scottie had said, only half-jokingly, "We want to make sure everyone can play nicely together!" It also was made clear that as the Executive Director of Communications he was expected to do everything with his power to "encourage" the committee members to work together toward a productive solution. Byron knew that there was a lot riding on the outcome of this committee's efforts, for both himself individually, as well as the university.

As an indication of its commitment to the project, the university hired an outside consultant specializing in branding and technology for higher education institutions to design the new website. Since the project was on a fast track with a target of unveiling the new website before the new semester began in September, the group got to work right away. They agreed to meet every 2 weeks to keep the momentum going and to meet the deadline. At the initial meeting Byron introduced the consultant, Martin Kelly, and gave an overview of the project. He also noted that the consultant's contract was limited in scope to 15 Web pages, including a new home page, as well as pages earmarked for university history, a message from the president, frequently asked questions, and other universal content. The intent was to establish and promote a clear brand across the general information sections of the site and to provide a foundational structure from which other departments could develop their own sites, though it would have to be at their own budgetary expense. The committee understood the limitations, and several people approached Martin after the meeting to discuss potential changes to their department's Web pages, or talked among themselves to consider possibilities that might benefit their departments.

Encouraged by the participation and collaborative spirit of the initial meeting, the next day Byron e-mailed a brief survey to committee members to get their views on the current website, both the positive aspects that they may want to retain, as well as any changes they would like to recommend. Although he was a bit disappointed by the limited number of responses he received, he was pleased to see that those who did respond provided detailed feedback. Also, there was a degree of consistency across the comments that confirmed that revisions to the website were the appropriate starting point for Livingston's branding makeover.

This informal needs assessment served as the starting point for the next meeting 2 weeks later. Byron began the second meeting by highlighting some key themes that had emerged from the survey (e.g., too much information; difficult to navigate; unappealing visuals). He then turned it over to Martin, who made a presentation to the committee highlighting his firm's experience and capabilities, and offering general ideas and examples for the committee to consider. Martin took up the discussion Byron had started, encouraging participants to elaborate on the comments they made on Byron's survey, or other issues that they thought might better identify a new direction for the website. When Martin was done, Byron took questions from the group. In answering them, he noticed

that many of the comments reflected the goals of the individual's department. He had been prepared for some level of territoriality, so he encouraged them to take a more collectivistic view toward how they could best address the needs of the entire university community. He managed to shift the discussion to focus on broader issues, but Byron sensed that this would be something he would really need to stay on top of if they wanted to complete their task within the deadline. The meeting adjourned with Martin's promise to have some initial designs prepared for the committee's review at the next meeting.

Before presenting the preliminary design to the committee at the next meeting, Byron and Martin agreed that they should preview it for key senior administrators and the deans of each of the three schools to get their buy-in, and to ensure that the design was in keeping with Livingston's view of the image of the school. Byron was anxious about the comments the executive level might offer, but they were positive overall and indicated they were interested in what the committee had to say. Encouraged by this initial feedback, Martin and Byron were eager to see if the committee was in agreement. There was a buzz in the room at the third meeting as Martin unveiled three potential designs for the new home page. The new pages were drastically different from the current home page, with more white space, less print, and cleaner graphics. Everyone started talking at once, excitedly noting the contrast from the current design and commenting on the layout, colors, and design. Once everyone got beyond the initial delight at the improvement and began focusing on specifics, a more serious discussion on the merits of each design ensued. One of the three options presented was quickly ruled out as it was a distant third to the other two designs. A second was well-liked, but the inclusion of a recurring graphic image of a student put some people off, so the consensus was to work with the final design.

While the comments were positive overall, several issues arose. Dr. Allison Marks, an associate dean, noted the need for a search function as well as the inclusion of a link from the home page to various school calendars. Bridget Wright, a senior assistant to the dean of the business school, was adamant that there should be direct links to each of the university's three schools on the home page. The director of admissions, Rick Daniels, wanted to see a more prominent link to the admissions department, though he was quick to point out that he was concerned about potential students being confused. Maureen Dennehy, the vice president of information technology, pointed out that the new website would require a more advanced technological infrastructure to accommodate the "bells and whistles" of the more sophisticated design. Although significant, the group agreed that the issues were solvable, so the rollout date was identified as mid-summer and the group suggested that a great deal of fanfare announce its arrival.

Carrying the momentum forward, Martin came to the next meeting well-prepared. He revised the initial designs to incorporate comments that the committee had made, and also introduced his idea for Livingston's new "brand," including logo, colors, fonts, and usage guidelines. Further, to address the technological concerns raised by Ms. Dennehy, he had done some preliminary research and created an evaluative comparison of possible content management systems (CMSs) that could handle the features of the newly designed website. Based on his findings, Martin noted to the group that because the

selection of a new CMS would directly influence other decisions about the site, the timeline for the rollout of the home page and additional contracted pages had to be pushed back to the beginning of July.

While disappointed by the delay, the committee was pleased with Martin's work. They agreed it was better to address all issues upfront, particularly since it was summer and the pace at the university was slower than usual, rather than be surprised later on. As Byron opened the meeting to discuss the revisions, comments and questions continued to focus on representation of the three schools on the home page, availability of the calendar and search function, and who should be involved in the selection of the CMS. Bridget Wright asked if each school's home page would mirror the university landing page. Byron reminded the group of the contractual parameters and that the original contract did not include development of separate images and pages for each school. Several groups again expressed interest in discussing separate contracts with Martin's company to develop their departmental websites to make them better sync with the new home page. In fact, Martin had told Byron that Rick Daniels had already approached him about the possibility of entering into a contract to update the Admissions Department website.

Despite the generally positive progress, Byron's anxiety was increasing. He was acutely aware of the subtle shifts that had taken place throughout the course of the meetings. He noticed that departments continued to stick together, figuratively and literally, based on the issues they were advocating. For example, Bridget Wright and Dr. Marks had begun sitting next to each other and supporting the ideas each other raised. Likewise, Stew and Claire, representatives for the library, typically sat next to Josh and James from student affairs, providing a supportive yet distinctly nonconfrontational cluster at one end of the table. The key players, namely those in more senior positions at the university, continued to press the agenda of their individual departments rather than focusing on the collective needs of the university. Further, in addition to their "pet" topics, they also monopolized discussions on peripheral issues. Byron recalled how during the last meeting Martin was questioned at length by both Bridget and Dr. Marks on his choice of a particular font, despite his expertise in the area and clearly stated reasoning for his selection.

On his way back to his office after the meeting, Byron was increasingly troubled by the direction the group had taken. Now closer to the end of the task than the beginning, the core group of "regulars" who attended the meetings remained involved and enthusiastic; however, the subgroups were monopolizing the direction of the meeting, and thus the development of the website. He was becoming frustrated that the equity he hoped to achieve through the formation of a "neutral" group was not coming to fruition. As he reviewed the issues the group targeted for further discussion and replayed the meetings in his head, he was hit with a sinking feeling that all the key issues that were still on the table for discussion had been identified by senior representatives within the group. In fact, as he gave it more thought he recognized that there were some people, like Stew, Claire, Josh, and James who hadn't ever spoken at a meeting! With the final decision on the website coming up soon, Byron knew he was rapidly approaching a point where it would be too late to create a more equitable climate before the project ended.

Byron decided that he needed to take a different approach at the next meeting to address the disparity. He was ever mindful of President Scottie's mandate that the different departments should "play nicely together" and that the diverse make-up of the committee should be reflected in the decision making. What sounded so good in theory, Byron was realizing, was much more difficult to translate into action. The reality was that there were not many occasions at Livingston when an assistant dean sat in the same meeting as a staff person and both were considered equal participants. If this group couldn't come together on something like a website, which was relevant to all their departments, how could they expect to be successful in forming other interdepartmental teams to address even more significant important campuswide issues? Byron snapped himself back to the matter at hand. "There's no sense worrying about that now," he thought, "when there might not be a future for me unless I can get this group to 'play nicely'!"

As a first step, Byron logged on to the restricted blog Martin had set up for the committee. He was happy to see that there was some activity by meeting participants as well as a few peripheral committee members who did not regularly attend the meetings. Dr. Marks also had made the selected design available to a group of students, who he had authorized blog access to get their feedback. Byron was encouraged that the blog was drawing some interest beyond the committee. While there were a variety of responses, they were general comments typically highlighting "wish list" items the respondents would like to see included on the redesigned website, from color suggestions to more detailed technical issues. However, as in the meetings, there were virtually no comments from the "silent minority," as Byron had come to think of those devoted committee members who attended the meetings but never went against the more prominent members or voiced their own issues or concerns. As he scrolled through the site he also noticed that Dr. Marks had posted a comment about the calendar function and a search option and was adamant about the inclusion of both. Rick Daniels had likewise made a comment about the importance of prominently featured links such as admissions and financial aid to better serve potential students. "Smart approach," thought Byron, "he's selling his own position without making it all about his department."

Since the blog confirmed a dichotomy that seemed to be based on differences in seniority, and given the shortening timeframe of the project, Byron knew that the next meeting would be his last opportunity to try to change the dynamics of the group. At that meeting, Martin would be presenting revisions to the selected design based on the committee's feedback. If the silent minority didn't speak up about issues they felt could impact their departments, the website design would be finalized with what amounted to no representation by these groups. While he recognized that some people may not be commenting because they were in full agreement with the committee's decisions, if they weren't participating because they were uncomfortable or intimidated, which Byron expected was the case, then all hopes of creating a flatter group model would fly out the window. It would take a delicate balance to encourage these participants while trying not to offend the more vocal senior members. "Oh brother!" Byron thought to himself. "I'm

doing it, too! I'm more worried about maintaining the status quo than taking the risk of saying the wrong thing! If I can't do it, how can I expect the others to?"

This epiphany sparked Byron into action. He sat down at his desk with his meeting notes and the blog open on his computer. He started a list and began grouping different discussion topics from the meetings and he realized that the meetings were very much in line with the culture of Livingston, particularly when it came to observing the hierarchy. He noted that although meeting participants were intended to have equal voices in the process, those with higher status, like the deans or their representatives, more openly expressed themselves, often with little or no feedback from other members. As he continued with his lists, Byron realized that in addition to their pet topics, those in senior positions also tended to monopolize discussions on peripheral issues like font size and locations of menu bars. "No wonder the silent majority doesn't speak!" Byron said aloud. "They can't get a word in edgewise!" With the evidence staring him in the face, Byron decided on a course of action.

At the next meeting Byron started off with a different approach. He distributed to each participant a worksheet that he had created. On it was a list of issues related to the design of the website that had repeatedly been discussed but not yet resolved, along with different options for their resolution. He asked each member to identify their recommended course of action for the listed items, noting that by doing so they could better direct their time and efforts to the issues that needed it most. As the group filled out the forms Byron mentally crossed his fingers. His hope was that this method would identify issues of concern to the *whole* group, forcing a more participatory discussion. Alternately, if there was little disagreement, he could report to President Scottie that even if the idea of an equitable group that wasn't based on seniority didn't work out, the group had completed their task and arrived at a consensus regarding the final redesign of the website.

The committee members passed their completed sheets toward him and talked among themselves while he and Martin tallied the results. As they reviewed the responses they exchanged a glance. Like Byron, Martin had become frustrated with the progress (and some of the members!) of the committee. After the last meeting when he and Byron went back to Byron's office he had burst out "I've been doing this for over 20 years! I've created websites and brands for at least 15 other schools and I know what works and what doesn't work. You're paying me to tell you, but these people aren't listening! You've got some serious issues to work out and they're stuck on what shade of color to use!" Byron commiserated with Martin and they vented for a while, but the fact remained that Byron was responsible for the project and its successful completion. Now, seeing the groups' responses in front of them, they both realized that Byron's concerns about a disparity in views were valid. Although there was unanimity on several issues, the committee was split on two of the recurring recommendations: the inclusion of links to the three schools on home page, and a calendar function on the home page. Byron stood to begin the discussion.

"Thank you all for this helpful feedback. It looks like we are in agreement on a number of issues, so I recommend we focus on the two key issues that remain. There are conflicting views on what links we should include on the home page; specifically, whether links to the three schools and to a calendar function should be included." Byron had barely finished his sentence when Bridget Wright spoke up. "This is ridiculous! There are only three schools and they should be prominently displayed on the home page. I don't know why we're even having this conversation again." Byron controlled his rising anger as he reiterated the same response that Martin had repeatedly proffered since the first time this issue was raised. "Of course it's important to offer information about the schools, but visitors can easily get to that using the academic tab, which, as Martin has pointed out to us based on his vast experience in creating college websites, is more intuitive for potential students. The idea is to keep the home page crisp and free from clutter to focus on those elements that are there."

He paused for a breath and thought to himself, "It's now or never!" Picking up the copies of the worksheet he said "Based on the responses we received here today, a number of people agree. Would any of you like to weigh in on this topic?" Out of the corner of his eye Byron saw the silent minority was very still. With a quick look at Claire, Stew leaned forward like he was about to say something. Byron held his breath hoping for the breakthrough, but before Stew could speak Dr. Marks jumped in. "I'm in agreement with Bridget. How much space will it take up? Why don't we just have it in both places?"

"Well," Byron started, stalling for time to allow Stew to jump in. However, Stew had quickly leaned back in his seat and became completely absorbed in his notes. "As Martin has pointed out, students are more likely to go to the academics tab because while they may know what area they want to major in, they're not always clear on which school houses their chosen major." The debate continued, as it did when the topic shifted to the inclusion of the calendar function, with Bridget and Dr. Marks advocating for their preferences, and Byron and Martin providing a counterview.

"We're not getting anywhere," Dr. Marks said as the end of the meeting got nearer. "What do you propose, Byron?" Before Byron could answer Bridget spoke up. "When is the next review by the deans? I think they would be interested in weighing-in on the final decision" she said pointedly. Byron responded that a meeting was scheduled with the deans for later that afternoon. Before he could get back to Dr. Marks' query, however, Dr. Marks got up and said "Well then, we may as well wait for their input instead of wasting any more time here. We'll look forward to hearing your report on the meeting, Byron." Shortly thereafter the meeting ended and the committee members, usually chatty following a meeting, left in relative silence.

Now, a week later, Byron sat in his office preparing for his meeting with President Scottie. He knew she'd want a detailed report on how the redesign process was going but also on the interactions within the committee. As he gathered his notes he looked up at the e-mail she had sent to confirm the meeting: "Looking forward to your update on the project and the committee. **Is everyone playing nicely together?**"

Discussion Questions

1. Byron was excited about convening the website redesign because it was an opportunity to offer an equal voice to participants across various levels of the university. Where did or didn't this occur? How did this affect the direction and outcomes of the group?
2. How did power play into the decision-making process of the Web Redesign Committee? In groups with participants from various organizational roles and levels, is it possible for everyone to have an equal voice?
3. Could some kind of intervention have helped the team work together more collaboratively? What would you have done if you were in Byron's position to make this team more successful?
4. In an organization with a hierarchal culture, is it possible to have "flat" committees in which all members are equal? Based on your group experiences, what do you think could have been done differently with the Web Redesign Committee to foster more equitable participation?
5. Imagine that you are a consultant hired by the school to shadow key members of the organization, and you sat in on all the meetings of the Web Redesign Committee. You have been asked to provide constructive, critical feedback to Byron on his role in the committee. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of Byron, as well as the team, and provide a briefing of alternative steps that might have been taken to encourage a more equitable participation environment.

FOR FURTHER READING

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