

### **Case #9: Allen Powell**

Department Chair Allen Powell gazed out of the window of the Electrical Engineering building, deep in thought. His desk was neatly organized and decorated with a glass faceted ball. Allen straightened his tie, stretched his fingers, and thought of what he would say to his colleague who was due to visit him soon. He decided the direct approach would be best. Too much tact might indicate that he was not serious about the problem.

Powell heard a knock on the door – a brisk, staccato tap. He rose and opened the door to greet Bimal Silva, the new faculty member in his department. They shook hands politely, and Silva took a seat opposite the grey desk.

Silva was neatly dressed in a suit and tie. His hair was short and his eyes were bright and intense. Powell knew Silva was brilliant, and wanted to keep him in the department. But this issue had to be addressed.

“So, how was your first semester of teaching?” Powell asked.

Silva shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. “Well, to be honest,” he said, “I am a little disappointed in the quality of student participation.”

“How so?”

“I often noticed that students would roll their eyes in class when asked a question or given assignments,” Silva replied. “The questions were clear. At my university in Sri Lanka, I participated in teaching courses. I am experienced in coming up with questions that students can easily understand.”

“How was their work?” Powell said. This conversation was turning out to be easier than he had anticipated.

“I was surprised to find that they were often unfamiliar with basic mathematical and scientific concepts,” Silva answered, “I understand that student retention of information can be short-lived, but these students have taken calculus.”

Powell recalled the remarks he had heard from the students in his laboratory. “Silva thinks we all ought to be geniuses,” one had said. “He’s arrogant,” another student replied. “I couldn’t solve those problem sets last week at all.”

Powell looked out the window briefly and then back at Silva. “The students are concerned, too, Silva,” he said. “On the one hand, I can understand your desire to give them a thorough and high-caliber education. But you need to work with them at the level where they currently are – even though it may seem elementary.”

“I’ve considered that as well,” Silva replied. “However, I feel strongly that I do not want to compromise academic standards. This would be taking them back to the freshman level.”

“I understand,” Powell replied, although he disagreed. “However, we must accommodate the students’ existing level of knowledge, or we cannot educate them. We need to make both our presentation and our content accessible to as many students as possible.” Powell leaned across his desk. “Frankly, Silva,” he said, “we’re honored to have you on our faculty. We’ll work with you. We want to help you succeed. But some things will have to change.”