

Case Study – Susan and George

Susan, a tenure track faculty member, visits the Ombuds Office and describes a situation with George, the Department Chair. Susan and George have been working together for about two years and Susan recently agreed to serve on a committee that George chairs. Susan's relationship with George has never been great but workable, but it's getting worse. Susan's visit to the Ombuds Office was initiated by a recent blow-up in a meeting in which George shouted at Susan in front of two other faculty members in the department. This was very upsetting because Susan had documentation proving what she was doing was what George had told her to do.

The other faculty members, present in the meeting, didn't say anything – they looked embarrassed. It seems like everyone in the department looks the other way and never confronts George about his behavior.

This is the second blow-up in a month or so, and this has occurred two or three additional times in the last two years. The last time George became so angry his face became blood red and he stood in Susan's door, blocking her exit, and clenching his fists. Susan was actually fearful of George. After these blow-ups, George seems sorry – he never apologizes, but his behavior is very cautious and semi-friendly, more so than usual.

After the recent blow-up, Susan told George that his behavior is unacceptable and the situation is getting unworkable. Susan dreads meetings with George and tries to stay away from him which is making it difficult to get work done for the Committee. Susan says she is becoming obsessed with what's happened with George – constantly talking about it to her husband and always thinking about their confrontations (e.g., what she should have said, what she will say next time, wondering when it will happen again, etc.). Susan feels that George has tons of power and since no one will do anything about George she is considering leaving the university. Susan says she needs George's support when she goes up for tenure and this is all adding to the stress of all the work and pressure leading up to her tenure review. Susan believes she has been drinking more than she should.

Susan believes that George is concerned about her contacting Human Resources because there was another situation in which George hollered at another faculty member...an episode in which the faculty member being hollered at by George had a heart-attack and an ambulance was called. Susan thinks litigation is ongoing. When Susan contacted Human Resources, they strongly recommended that Susan not file a grievance.

What suggestions do you have for Susan?