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Changing Course to Stay in Power at the University of Virginia: A Coalition Theory Perspective

Abstract

[Excerpt] For several weeks in the summer of 2012 the University of Virginia became the center of national media attention in America because of the forced resignation of the university's first female president. Teresa Sullivan, a highly reputable academic administrator, had been hired as president in 2010 with a 5 year contract by the unanimous decision of the Board of Visitors, UVA's formal leadership body. Yet on June 8, 2012 the Board of Visitors forced Sullivan to resign from her position as president by a vote of 15 to 1—without any warning or prior indication of dissatisfaction. The firing of an elite public university president without warning was unprecedented and the shock of this decision was exacerbated by the Board's initial statement which failed to indicate any specific reasons other than “philosophical difference[s]”.¹ In the weeks that followed, an intense backlash led by faculty and students demanded Sullivan's reinstatement and led the Board to unanimously rehire Sullivan on June 26. The incredible speed of these events leads to a salient question: how and why did the Board so drastically change their minds on such an important decision in less than three weeks? I will analyze the events of the UVA presidential crisis through the lens of coalition theory to show how the interactions between core members, players, and tag-alongs in the Board, faculty, and students rapidly dissolved one set of coalitions to form a new one in response to the crisis.

Keywords

HR Review, Human Resources, Coalitions, Organizations, Self-Preservation, Self-Interest, Job Security

Disciplines

Human Resources Management | Industrial and Organizational Psychology | Labor Relations | Organizational Communication | Social Psychology and Interaction

Comments

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CORNELL HR REVIEW

SACRIFICING ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS FOR SELF-PRESERVATION

CHANGING COURSE TO STAY IN POWER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA: A COALITION THEORY PERSPECTIVE

Steven Conaton

For several weeks in the summer of 2012 the University of Virginia became the center of national media attention in America because of the forced resignation of the university's first female president. Teresa Sullivan, a highly reputable academic administrator, had been hired as president in 2010 with a 5 year contract by the unanimous decision of the Board of Visitors, UVA's formal leadership body. Yet on June 8, 2012 the Board of Visitors forced Sullivan to resign from her position as president by a vote of 15 to 1—without any warning or prior indication of dissatisfaction. The firing of an elite public university president without warning was unprecedented and the shock of this decision was exacerbated by the Board's initial statement which failed to indicate any specific reasons other than "philosophical difference[s]".¹ In the weeks that followed, an intense backlash led by faculty and students demanded Sullivan's reinstatement and led the Board to unanimously rehire Sullivan on June 26. The incredible speed of these events leads to a salient question: how and why did the Board so drastically change their minds on such an important decision in less than three weeks? I will analyze the events of the UVA presidential crisis through the lens of coalition theory to show how the interactions between core members, players, and tag-alongs in the Board, faculty, and students rapidly dissolved one set of coalitions to form a new one in response to the crisis.

The Coalition to Remove President Sullivan

While the sudden demand for her resignation may have surprised Sullivan, the decision had been in the making for several months prior to the June 8 announcement. Over the course of the two years that she had served as president, Sullivan increasingly came into conflict with the rector (leader) of the Board, a real estate developer named Helen Dragas. Although Dragas was part of the unanimous hiring decision in 2010, by 2012 she had become frustrated with the university's precarious financial situation and lack of progress on Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as compared with other elite universities. In April of 2012 Dragas wrote to the vice-rector that she was "growing increasingly nervous that others are thinking about big trends and long-term prospects for higher education delivery and funding."² Adding to Dragas's concern, in May she received a letter from a group of 450 faculty members complaining that faculty salaries had fallen well below UVA's competitors and demanding "urgent and immediate action."³ Believing her concerns to be endorsed by a coalition of faculty members, Dragas began assembling a coalition of Board members to make a decision to remove Sullivan from office.

In this coalition to terminate Sullivan, Dragas was the core member who sought to recruit enough other members of the Board to form a dominant coalition. Although it is difficult to know exactly what method of negotiation Dragas employed, it appears likely that there was a degree of log-rolling by other less-invested Board members. Dragas's strong feelings about the future direction of the university with regard to MOOCs and new technology likely lead her to "overstate the consequences of coordinated action"⁴ and press the case that removing Sullivan would allow them to hire a new president that would resolutely move the university to the cutting edge of that new technology. Because 12 of the 16 board members had been appointed while Sullivan was already UVA president, some of those members were likely attracted by the prospect of getting in on the ground floor of a new president search and have an opportunity to "shape [the coalition's] agenda and platform"⁵ to their own benefit. By June Dragas had recruited 15 of 16 Board members to her coalition and was able to move forward with her initiative to remove President Sullivan.

The Coalition of Opposition

Dragas believed that the faculty who had lobbied for higher salaries would support the ouster and join her own coalition to move in a new direction. However, the UVA faculty, consisting of about 1,800 full-time instructors and researchers, reacted to the news of Sullivan's resignation with "real outrage."⁶ The sudden ouster of a president with an academic background incited suspicion that the Board intended to fundamentally change the status quo of the university. While Dragas publicly stated that an increase in faculty salaries might occur when she hired a "stellar new president", this failed to move faculty members to join her coalition because the action of the sudden firing signaled a threat to academic job security.⁷ Even the remote possibility of weakened job security far outweighed the potential benefits of higher salaries for most faculty members (Kahneman and Tversky's Prospect Theory provides some insight into the motivating power of the fear of loss over the possibility of gain).⁸ Coalition theory is reflected in this situation as the faculty members who initially tried to form a coalition with Dragas to demand higher salaries quickly abandoned her when she took action, and their "post-decision disappointment" lead to the "dissolution [of the coalition] during implementation."⁹ Within days the Executive Council of the Faculty Senate released a statement opposing Sullivan's removal.¹⁰

This decisive alignment of faculty leaders with President Sullivan laid the groundwork for an opposition coalition, which itself began the process of log-rolling; the following day thirty-three faculty department chairs and program directors signed and sent a letter to the Board protesting the ouster and demanding action to "reopen discussion" on the decision.¹¹ This opposition coalition quickly gained traction and additional members as the national news media began to cover the unfolding story and reporters descended on the campus. A large group of students on the campus also joined in this new coalition, gathering over 2000 signatures on a petition and launching a 3000 member Facebook protest page to demand the reinstatement of President Sullivan, despite the majority of students being absent for the summer break.¹²

Many of these new student and faculty coalition members joined as tag-alongs; the petition and Facebook page are representations of the symbolic benefit of joining the organization—students saw the sudden ouster “as important and join[ed] to show that, but they [did] not have the resources to devote core membership activities to it.”¹³ Most of these students were a part of the coalition but, being far removed from the levers of power they had very little opportunity to influence the agenda other than to generally pressure the Board of Visitors. Nevertheless, the ever-growing group of thousands of students and faculty members were unified in their desire to see President Sullivan reinstated. Coalition theory is helpful in understanding how this group of individuals with vastly disparate interests (salary, research, coursework, campus life, etc.) could so quickly and so firmly come together in support of a single issue.

Collapsing and Reforming Coalitions

As the opposition coalition grew in size and furor, the coalition of 15 Board members who voted to terminate Sullivan in the first place began to fracture. Although the core members led by Dragas attempted to move forward in the search and hire of a new president in order to attract more support, the opposition pressure overwhelmed the less-committed tag-along Board members. Those tag-alongs, who were initially “willing to let others use their name” to enjoy the benefits of association, recognized that the negative publicity raised by the opposition coalition was damaging their own interests.¹⁴ They began to look for a way out of the coalition, but were not yet willing to leave a majority position of power on the Board to be a part of a powerless minority opposed to the termination.

With an opposition coalition of faculty, students, and increasing numbers of outside groups supporting her, Sullivan reemerged to take a leadership role by speaking at protests and giving interviews with news media. Thousands of people attended a student-organized “Rally for Honor,” staged at the UVA campus on June 24, that featured speeches by prominent faculty and Sullivan herself demanding action by the Board.¹⁵ Many of these speeches were intended to not only generate support for the opposition coalition, but primarily to sway wavering members of the Board of Visitors to change sides. There was a focus on issues that aligned with the interests of Board members, promising that the university would emerge stronger if they reinstated Sullivan.¹⁶

With tag-alongs searching for an exit, the pressure from the opposition coalition began mounting on Board players as well. The governor of Virginia at the time, Bob McDonnell, publicly demanded that the Board make a “final action” at a June 26 meeting, or he would “ask for the resignation of the entire Board.”¹⁷ At the same time, faculty members in the opposition threatened to quit their posts, raising the possibility of an “exodus” from UVA, the negative consequences of which would have far outweighed the potential future benefits of a new president of their choosing. As the players and tag-alongs saw that the existing coalition no longer served their interests, they aligned themselves with the opposition and prepared to vote to reinstate Sullivan at the June 26 meeting. With a substantial number of Board members leaving Dragas’ coalition there

would have been no point for her and the other core members to maintain their original position. The threat of a forced resignation of the entire Board was a powerful motivator for all members of the Board to reach a unanimous resolution; even if Dragas and her core allies had to capitulate, that would still serve their individual interests better than being forced to resign.

Underlying Interests Exposed Through Coalition Theory

At the time, the Board's unanimous decision to reinstate Sullivan was seen as a shocking turnaround from the 15 to 1 vote to terminate her three weeks earlier. This sequence of events is representative of the fragile nature of coalitions, as the disparate interests of independent actors can be circumvented in the pursuit of a common goal. Yet these coalitions can just as easily dissolve as actions clarify the implications of this pursuit. In this case, members of the Board had unique goals but voluntarily agreed to form a coalition to remove Sullivan—even if her removal wasn't a primary goal of every individual in the coalition—to be in a better position to achieve their individual goals in the future. Those individual goals may have been served by helping select a new president or even being a member of a Board that was willing to make tough decisions, ensuring that their vote for future influence would have been a “mutually acceptable trade.”¹⁸ However, the voluntary nature of this coalition was brought into relief as outside pressure raised the possibility that Board members might not achieve their individual goals. Coalitions “start strong and end weak,” and this was exactly the case as the Board's initial enthusiasm for finding a new decisive president waned in their recognition of the overwhelming opposition.¹⁹

Coalition theory then offers a unique perspective through which to view this crisis—one where the narratives offered by different stakeholders can be stripped away in order to identify the underlying interests guiding the shifting allegiances of multiple actors. Actors in a coalition bear allegiance to self-interest and self-preservation above all else, and the UVA crisis underscores that allegiance as all of the actors gave up individual goals at some point to maintain or retain their position of relative power. Sullivan was reinstated, but at the same time all of the Board members, including Dragas, retained their positions and agreed to forge ahead in a new coalition despite the animosity induced by the crisis. Ultimately, the Board and Sullivan agreed that their individual goals would be best served by putting the crisis behind them and working together again. None of these actions served organizational goals, and they are incomprehensible when viewed through a traditional rational actor model—these inconsistent choices were clearly not the result of any unified actor making a probabilistic cost-benefit analysis. Although organizations are often viewed as rational actors who make strategic decisions, cases like the UVA crisis make it abundantly clear that the organizational leadership is ultimately comprised of individual actors who often sacrifice ideals and organizational goals to retain their positions of power. ✕

Steven Conaton is a former band director and autism therapist who received his Master of Human Resources from the University of Illinois. He will be moving to Cincinnati with his wife, Kate, to work for Procter & Gamble in January.

Steven was the winner of the 2014 Cornell HR Review Annual Essay Competition.

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⁵ Daniel McFarland and Charles J. Gomez, *Organizational Analysis*, (2014): 57.

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¹¹ Daniel De Vise and Anita Kumar, "Teresa Sullivan Ouster: 33 Faculty Leaders Protest her Dismissal from University of Virginia Presidency," *The Washington Post*, June 13, 2012. Accessed April 15, 2014.

¹² Daniel De Vise and Anita Kumar, "Teresa Sullivan Ouster: 33 Faculty Leaders Protest her Dismissal from University of Virginia Presidency," *The Washington Post*, June 13, 2012. Accessed April 15, 2014.

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