

Because the Stakes Are So Small

by

Jerry Kirkpatrick

a post from his [blog](#):

Monday, April 14, 2008

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In academia there is an adage that says disputes among professors are bitter precisely because the stakes are so small. The statement has been attributed to various people, including Henry Kissinger and Woodrow Wilson. In print the more general conception is known as [Issawi's](#) law of social motion, specifically: "In any dispute the intensity of feeling is inversely proportional to the value of the stakes at issue. That is why academic politics are so bitter." I question the generalization that high-stakes issues lack intense feeling, but the more significant point is what exactly is the nature of the stakes that the adage refers to and whose stakes are we talking about?

Much has been written by academics about why the disputes are so bitter and the answer generally is the golden handcuffs of tenure. Working in a profession that lacks tangible rewards, professors crave status and recognition, but they are cooped up like rats or chickens with the same coworkers for decades. "Married without the possibility of divorce," says one commentator, "angry faculty members exhaust themselves in petty battles over ancient personal resentments that pretend to be principles."

[[1](#)]

The protection of tenure and academic freedom, says another, gives some professors "license to behave with little regard for civility or collegiality."

[[2](#)] In business, this writer points out, one can move on to another company, thus minimizing the irritation of disagreements with fellow workers, but in academia, where the ease of going elsewhere becomes more difficult with the number of years beyond tenure, the distress of every resentment and annoyance grows until it erupts into volcanic acrimony. To outsiders a dispute over who gets a new \$100 office chair may seem small, hence the expression, but to the participants in the dispute the stakes loom large. Why?

The disputes are not often over tangibles, such as new office chairs. They may be over class scheduling, the elimination of a favorite course, or, more seriously, who gets hired, promoted, or tenured. This last brings up comparisons of competence. The willingness to hire, promote, or tenure someone who is better than oneself—for example, in teaching, service, or scholarship—requires a strong, self-sufficient ego.

The following statement by former General Electric chief executive officer, Jack Welch, and his wife, Suzy Welch, former editor of the *Harvard Business Review*, is one not shared by many academics:

Seek out people who are better, smarter, and in every way more talented than you are. They'll push the organization to new heights of performance. And we guarantee your career will follow. [3]

Instead, rationalization upon rationalization, if not outright hostility, will be flung into the discussion to justify why such a person is not qualified. The rigors of scholarly logic disappear where personnel and other administrative decisions are concerned. Protecting one's turf—and frail ego—becomes paramount. A frail ego with low self-esteem cannot tolerate the prospect of a better colleague gaining (perceived) position and power. The stakes, psychologically speaking, have become huge. This does not take into consideration the fact that the stakes for the person being considered for employment, promotion, or tenure are equally huge. The adage about academic life is ambiguous in this respect.

Not every academic, of course, suffers such a low level of self-esteem, but enough seem to populate campuses around the world to justify the expression. The disputes of the academic world have no tangible effect on tenured professors. To outsiders, therefore, the privileged professors are still tenured and still have their jobs; so what if they have to teach a different schedule or work beside colleagues who are better than they? It is impossible for an outsider to think anything other than that the stakes are small. Psychologically, however, the privileged ones find it intolerable to have anyone change their comfortable schedules or to have someone new

come in and expose their shortcomings. Envy, jealousy, and resentment move to the forefront, while rationality goes out the window.

So if one has sufficient self-esteem not to get upset over a schedule change or over colleagues who are better than they, how does such a person cope with those who fling the rationalizations and hostility and, more generally, throw tantrums in department meetings? Ms. Mentor, a.k.a. Emily Toth, columnist for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, encourages young and old professors alike to view the events of academia from a literary perspective, as a play, as it were, albeit with “atrociously bad actors”:

There are serfs; there are dragons; there are definitely bats in belfries. Ideally, you find teaching exciting and mind-stretching (if you don't, you should leave the profession). But sometimes the longitudinal study of your colleagues—Oliver Awkward, Sara Surreptitious, Barnaby Bluster—is the most entertaining, and the longest-lasting show of your life.

Ms. Mentor urges you not to miss a minute of it. [\[4\]](#)

It is this perspective, I admit, that I need to work on!