



## Turning around a troubled academic department and resolve long-standing conflicts



### ORGANISATION

University - Academic Department



### INDUSTRY

Higher Education



### ABOUT

This university enrolled more than 60 000 students during 2018. Due to the amalgamation of three different institutions, it is the largest residential higher education institution in South Africa.

### CHALLENGE

One of the departments within this institution (consisting of members with a diverse cultural background), serving more than 4000 students had become highly dysfunctional over a period and was characterised by low levels of trust, a blaming culture, infighting, conflict and the establishment of ‘camps’ among various groups (HOD, academic staff and support staff). The situation deteriorated, and it got to the point where certain academic personnel instituted a grievance procedure against the HOD. There were already indications of subsequent disciplinary proceedings to be invoked after the grievance procedure, when the executive dean, Dr Edgar Nesamvuni (who was familiar with the work of the Arbinger Institute), reached out to the Arbinger Institute.

### SOLUTION

Dr Nesamvuni, who was familiar with the work of the Arbinger Institute, engaged the institute, being confident that the Arbinger process could help restore the dysfunctional relationships among members in the department. Arbinger approached the problem through a combination of workshops, consulting, and executive coaching sessions. Members of the department were equipped with tools and frameworks to see how they were blinded to the true nature of the conflict and then seeing the situation in a new light. The impact of the engagements was almost immediate.

Following the workshop, a few members of the department made the following comments, *“the good spirit in the department returned; there is a hugely visible and positive change in the department, relationships have been restored; I want to come to the office now; this was the best programme ever.”*

The Arbinger team knows from experience that in most conflicts, members in the various ‘camps’ believe they know precisely what the other side is doing wrong, but are blind to how they are contributing to the problem themselves. This was once again the case in this academic department. As is typically the case, each side dug in unnecessarily, focused on tangential issues, and failed to seek solutions to the primary issues behind the conflict—even though the costs of the conflict were extremely high for all parties (both personally and professionally).

The executive dean received the following email from a senior academic in the department, subsequent the various interventions.

“Dear Dr Nesamvuni, thank you so much for allowing our department the opportunity to attend the Arbinger programme and engage in the subsequent processes. It was insightful and valuable – both on a personal and work-related level. I have faith that the relationships in the department are restored and that we all are looking forward to achieving departmental and faculty goals with success. My personal appreciation to the HOD that is visibly supportive, caring and motivating his staff. Thank you again.”

## **RESULTS**

The Arbinger process enabled academics in this department to see how they were contributing to the conflict and, much to their surprise, how they were unwittingly inviting the very behaviour they said they disliked in one another. Four months after the intervention, the executive dean met with the department and had the following to say, “It was the most pleasurable meeting ever. The laughter in the room was something to behold. Furthermore, the grievance was withdrawn and the HOD decided not to follow through on the planned disciplinary process. This material really delivers results and it literally saved this department. The department is now fully functional and there is peace in the corridors. I will definitely engage Arbinger again, should I ever be faced with a similar situation.”

## **FEEDBACK**

Listen to Dr Nesamvuni:

<https://www.arbinger.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/TUT.wav>

**HOW WE HELP** We help individuals, teams, and organisations move from the default self-focus inward mindset to the results-focused outward mindset. Through training, coaching, consulting, and a suite of implementation tools, we enable organisations and their people to achieve results that are only possible with an outward mindset.

**OUR EXPERIENCE** Our programmes and methodology are based on 45 years of research in the psychology of human behaviour and motivation, and more than 35 years of experience working with organisations worldwide in the corporate, healthcare, education, government, public safety, and non-profit sectors.