

Addressing Staff Concerns in Changing Times: Supporting the Institution's Greatest Asset

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Abstract: The strategic plan at Carnegie Mellon University highlights the important contributions that staff members make to the organization. Concomitantly the university encourages the growth of a diverse campus community and stresses the important of developing a culture of respect. The university libraries have embraced these two threads – recognizing the important contributions made by staff and the desirability of a diverse work force. This paper discusses the importance of these two threads and highlights the various steps taken to acknowledge staff contributions and to create a culture of respect.

Keywords: diversity, respect, staff development, strategic plan, support staff, training.

The University

Since its founding in 1900 by Andrew Carnegie, Carnegie Mellon University has evolved from a local technical school known as the Carnegie Technical Schools (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) to the Carnegie Institute of Technology and finally into a research university.[1] When the institution was initially established, no provisions were made for a library at the school. Instead library services were to be provided by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, another institution founded by Andrew Carnegie, and located nearby. Throughout its history, the institution developed and grew systematically and responded to opportunities that fed the transformation to a research university. Andrew Carnegie's often quoted motto seen prominently at the university is "my heart is in the work" and has been taken to heart by many employees.

The education institution has strategically responded to changes throughout its history. Like many organizations, strategic planning has been initiated to crystallize discussion around organizational direction and to articulate vision, goals and strategies that set the framework for institutional growth. The most recent strategic plan includes a plank that voices the importance of staff to the success and future of the university. [2] The strategic plan notes the changing demographics of the students of the university, the increasing international thrust of the university in collaboration and campus outreach. As the institution has achieved an international profile, the importance of melding local presence, international reach and changing demographics into a coherent and vibrant institution has become crucial. The plan posits that the university must take into consideration these changing demographics and the importance of local values to the success of the university.

In 1996, the work of the Task Force on Under-represented Minorities and the Women's Task Force underscored the fact that the climate of the institution to women

and minorities was somewhat unfriendly. The university has long recognized that the goal of creating a broad based work force is not achieved without thoughtful discussion, analysis, planning and action. The strategic plan of 1998 set out objectives to address and change the climate. For example, the diversity of the student body had already begun to change and, importantly women were applying to the school of computer science in record numbers. The school welcomed and sought out qualified women students and intentionally changed the climate and atmosphere in the school. The result has been an increase in the admittance of women into computer science. [3]

In considering the local work force of non-faculty or support staff, the university has sought to not only draw in more applicants for positions and broaden the pool of applicants, it has also worked to achieve a more welcoming work environment. What does a welcoming work environment mean? It's the establishment of a culture that celebrates differences, does not tolerate prejudicial or demeaning behavior or actions. Because the university prides itself on being a learning environment, it is optimistic that creating a culture of dialog, tolerance and frank discourse will foster and create a better work place.

The goals of personnel management have changed over the last twenty years at the institution. People's hearts were in the work. Good job performance was rewarded and advancements were possible. People came to work, did their job, received annual increases and took vacation. Employment benefits typically awarded included vacation, health care and sick leave. We find now that employees want to be acknowledged in new ways; they need different benefits and rewards. They want to contribute and be acknowledged differently.

The University Library

The library has a staff of 90 plus twenty-eight full-time equivalent student workers. Of the 90 staff, twenty-six are librarians or archivists. The libraries are comprised of a variety of staff; twelve percent are from under-represented minorities; other staff are from Bulgaria, Canada, China, India, and Pakistan. It is a diverse staff in background, training, education, status, gender and discipline. The libraries believe that the future of libraries is digital but even with that goal to unite the library work force, differences and tensions stemming from age, background and academic discipline or training surface from time to time.

For years, the library took measured steps to engage the library staff in organizational governance. An initial step was the inclusion of support staff on the library council, a body that shaped broad issues and set policy library-wide. Appointment and assignment to standing committees, task forces and librarian search committees was another way for support staff to participate in library governance and service. Library support staff assumed leadership roles in many instances – recognition of talent and accomplishment. As a rule, task forces and working groups are often formed to

achieve specific tasks or projects. Some support staff because of their skills and knowledge have been key players.

It takes the combined talents of a variety of individuals to successfully complete task force assignments and projects. And this diverse talent brings a variety of skills and personal perspectives to the work at hand. Some staff members possess superior technical skills; others exhibit strong communication skills, while others may be most adept at focusing on task or project detail. Tensions can easily arise from the collision of the experienced technologist and the technophobe; the gregarious personality and the studied, quiet individual. Despite best intentions the work of some groups has stumbled – not because of the challenge of the task but the challenge of collaboration.

The library in this educational institution has taken considered and thoughtful steps to assess and address the issues that related to staff welfare and well-being. Being situated in an institution of learning, the opportunity to draw on expertise within the university to focus on answers or solutions is of genuine benefit. Expertise exists not only with the faculty but within human resources and through the training of existing staff. The library promotes training and learning opportunities so that staff receive the best training, that whenever possible staff have access to the best computing support and hardware, and that staff are recognized for the efforts made in the completion of their assignments.

Library staff are encouraged and supported in efforts to improve work place skills through attendance at campus workshops, conference attendance for both librarians and line staff, and support for advanced degrees through tuition support. Professional development courses available on campus include computer application training, supervisory training, skill development and personal development. The libraries have supported attendance at conferences and off-campus training focusing on support staff development and high level computer support such as SANS Computer Security programs. Library staff have obtained undergraduate degrees from Carnegie Mellon, advanced degrees in non-profit management and in professional writing at Carnegie Mellon and have pursued advanced degrees in library and information science at local institutions.

Opportunities to assume leadership roles, participate in governance and other assignments, and support for training and education were key to building a committed work force. Although over time it became clear that these alone were not enough. The added mechanisms to build a better work environment have taken many forms: effective feedback on job performance, training, personal development, and recognition. Initiatives originate from several sources including university human resources, library administration, and library staff.

Action Focused on Employees

The library has long had a regular annual review of employee job performance. An evaluation tool was used that allowed for a preformed assessment of job performance. Providing more meaningful review would better acknowledge the value of job and work accomplished. A performance management process (PMP), also known as Partnering for Performance allows for staff assessment of their performance, feedback from the supervisor and the opportunity to comment on and evaluate the “core competencies” of the position. Also included in the review process is goal review for the current year and goal articulation for the upcoming year. Core competencies encompass customer service, teamwork, initiative, leadership, and communication.

The PMP document provides a structured opportunity to provide direct and personal feedback to employees about their work. Goals that are articulated in the document are to be reviewed throughout the year at period, usually monthly, meetings between supervisor and employee. Annual goals may include specific projects, or new training that employees and supervisor agree to. In addition to a new evaluation form, supervisory personnel are encouraged to attend supervisory and management courses focusing on communication and assessment to better use the new evaluation tools and learn to provide more meaningful review of and feedback to employees.

In addition to evaluating employee performance in the library, a program of upward evaluation has been implemented. [4] This program is designed to provide feedback on the performance of individuals who supervise other employees. Briefly, employees are asked to answer questions about a supervisor’s manner of interacting with employees. The responses to the questions are sent to the supervisor of the supervisor who reads the comments, synthesizes the commentary and discusses the synthesized feedback with the supervisor about the comments received. Participation in the upward feedback evaluation is not required but is encouraged. Results of the upward evaluation have been mixed. It has provided an opportunity to identify areas where a supervisor may need to improve communication or to receive additional supervisory training. At the same time, participation of employees is less than sixty percent.

The evolution of the library organization has brought together librarians and other knowledge workers who exhibit disciplinary differences. Analysis of library challenges, which is healthy but can create tension and conflict, and response to those challenges exhibit differing approaches to solutions. This cultural difference was one impetus for establishing a series of workshops for all staff on respect. Library administration in consultation with Library Council established a program designed to probe the issues around disrespect. The respect program had several components.

Though it would be simple to mandate a culture of mutual respect and openness, it seemed that new measures and tools could be drawn on to engage staff thought about the working climate and personal attitudes and behaviors. The tools drawn upon included video, theatre and personality assessment testing. At the same time the

university was intensely engaged in thinking through issues around personal and racial differences. Joel Barker's *Wealth, Innovation & Diversity* [6] played a key role in surfacing issues related to diversity in the workplace. Barker's central thesis centers on the importance of biological diversity in nature and how that diversity strengthens the environment. Organizations, he contends are stronger when they are able to successfully embrace a diversity of people and talents. Barker's video was shown several times to library staff and was used as a focal point for discussion among staff.

A library sponsored series on exploring issues around respect had several components that one hoped would appeal to individuals with differing learning styles. Some programs allowed the creation of smaller discussion groups that allowed individuals to have the opportunity to reflect on the issues raised in each event or exercise and to allow for discussion in smaller groups. Every program or event included a discussion component.

Interactive Theatre, a series of fifteen-minute dramatizations developed through the University's Human Resources Office and the Entertainment Technology Center, provided an opportunity for individuals to probe issues around sexual harassment, diversity and chilly climate.[7] Sketches were developed through a professional writing program and professional actors played the roles in the sketches. Scenarios honed in on day-to-day office experiences and showcased how individuals unconsciously and thoughtlessly intrude in work spaces or disregard and disrespect others. Following the performance, audience members were invited and encouraged to engage the actors in dialog about their characters and actions. During the post-performance discussion, the actors remained in character during the question period. After this conversation, staff engaged in further discussion and observations. Often skits were repeated to allow for broader library attendance at the program. Interactive theatre proved to be an effective tool to stimulate discussion about personal and workplace behaviors.

A controversial component of the respect program was the use of psychological tests, both the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Firo-B. [8] Though the intent was for staff to use these tools to gain personal insight on how they and others behave differently and to reflect on the diverse manner in ways of co-workers, there was a mistrust of these tools and a reluctance to embrace them. A well-meant attempt to use these tools for personal and individual benefit was met with skepticism and a feeling that perhaps this sort of testing – even though the results were given only to individuals – was too intrusive. Individuals were given their personal results privately and there was again a group discussion led by a human resources staff member. The benefits of learning from these tools were offset by the unease staff members felt.

Another element in the respect program was tied to the university's strong belief in building a diverse work force. [9] Each unit of the university is required to create a

diversity strategic plan. A task force drawn from all ranks in the library was established to focus attention on this issue. In the course of plan development, a retreat away from campus was held to work on the plan and have a thorough discussion of issues related to the plan. Subsequently, the draft plan was presented to library staff at several open meetings where the plan was explained within the context of the university's plan and where questions and concerns could be aired. Creating this plan with staff participation and sharing it often and broadly in its development were crucial.

Two committees in the library focus on staff issues, the Employee Development Committee and the Esprit de Corps. The first coordinates staff continuing education and training programs on topics pertinent to library staff and will make staff aware of opportunities for continuing education on or off campus. The latter coordinates social activities for the staff (e.g., holiday party, staff and student appreciation parties, celebration of special events, etc.). These grass roots initiatives have successfully contributed to the betterment of the library and to the development of stronger personal ties among library staff.

In the final analysis, the pronouncements at the highest level of the institution can only set a tone or direction for the institution. It is incumbent on individual divisions to take appropriate action and initiative. The underlying question about the investment in staff is whether these efforts make a difference in the quality of life, the quality of work and in the retention of library staff. What this library has observed from these efforts is that library staff has embraced the learning culture that is the university, have developed a voice within the organization, and have been full participants in strategic initiatives. This paper reports on efforts at one university library over a period of ten years. In examining the past and looking at today, one can note that organizational needs evolve, staff desires and needs change and institutions must respond. The future no doubt will be a continuation and evolution of the intertwining strands of organizational structure – the ongoing development and nurturing of the institution's greatest asset – the staff members of the university community.

References

[1] Fenton, Edwin. *Carnegie Mellon 1900-2000. A Centennial History*. Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2000, pp. 16.

[2] *Nurturing an Accomplished Community* Available:
<http://www.cmu.edu/splan/Community.htm> [March 28, 2004]

[3] Detail about the composition of the Carnegie Mellon community can be found in *Carnegie Mellon Facts*, v.17 (2003). The Carnegie Mellon fact book for 2003 and for earlier years dating back to 1995 may be found at the Planning Office website at Carnegie Mellon. Available: <http://www.cmu.edu/planning/facts2003/main.html> [March 28, 2004]

[4] The concept of Partnering for Performance links individual job performance to the attainment of Carnegie Mellon's vision, mission and goals. Available: <http://hr.web.cmu.edu/> [March 28, 2004] Select Supervisor, then Managing, then Performance Review Forms. The library has modified the university form. A copy can be obtained by contacting the author.

[5] Stein, Joan, "Upward Appraisal: A Tool for the Continuous Improvement of Library Managers' Skills." *Proceedings of the First Northumbria International Conference on Performance Measurement in Libraries and Information Services*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Information North, 1995, pp. 241-254.

[6] Barker, Joel A. *Joel Barker's Wealth, Innovation & Diversity: Putting Our Differences to Work in the 21st Century*. St. Paul, MN: Star Thrower Distribution, 2000.

[7] Available: <http://www.etc.cmu.edu/projects/interact/default.html> [March 28, 2004]

[8] Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is a psychological tool that through a set of questions aids an individual in understanding personality style and preferences. The FIRO-B is a management tool designed to help individuals comprehend their personal communication style and through this analysis help communication and relationships in organizations.

[9] The Vision for Diversity at Carnegie Mellon stresses the institution's strategic commitment to creating and sustaining a diverse campus community, and to foster a culture of mutual respect. See <http://hr.web.cmu.edu/drg/overview/vision.html>. The library plan for diversity was developed by a library diversity committee. See the Library Diversity Strategic plan at <http://www.library.cmu.edu/Libraries/DiversityStratPlanT.ppt> [March 28, 2004]