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Changing the Climate: Staff Development Activities that Address the Real Issue, Communication in the Workplace

When large libraries are fortunate enough to have multiple departments where staff are assigned to carry out specific tasks within their unit, broader communication lines within the entire organization are often disconnected. This, in turn, creates a one-dimensional level of communication that often hampers the ability to have a collaborative and engaged work environment within the organization. These environments often result in work relationships that are compartmentalized, providing very little interaction across organizational departments. Transforming the workplace environment to a healthier climate that involves employee engagement and cross-departmental communication can be accomplished through the efforts of a staff development committee. This article examines the effect that an organized staff development committee has on changing the climate in a workplace where the lack of communication among employees is a barrier to creativity and productivity and is often the source of low morale. In addition, this article will provide sample activities and programs that can be used to address communication issues that occur due to compartmentalized environments within workplace organizations.

Literature Review

Library literature on staff development examines the effectiveness of utilizing programs and activities that enhance the organizational climate as well as communication among employees. Although the definition of staff development is broad, it can be interpreted as a way of advancing work-related skills or as a means of providing programs and activities used to repair work relationships for better communication; because of this, staff development initiatives are viewed as essential to any organization.

Although the purpose of a staff development committee may vary from organization to organization, the main function of such a committee is to build a foundation in which employees feel connected and in which their contribution to the work that they do is validated through upgrades of meaningful skills and personal relationships that create a healthy work environment and climate. Davis and Lundstrom suggest the following:

Most staff development committee (SDC) programs have multiple goals, however, two components of these goals remain constant. The first is a focus on skills training that keeps staff technology relevant and adept at the technologies and duties that relate to their role in the library. The second component is an emphasis on improving and building inter-library relationships. Both goals require planning, resources, and most importantly, the support of staff at all levels of the library.[1]

"Success in any academic library is attributed to the staff," state Davis and Lundstrom. They define staff training as implementing programs to improve overall performance in order to be more innovative as an organization and to bridge a gap between present and desired performance. In addition, Davis and Lundstrom state that staff development committees help to improve individual skills and build interpersonal relationships throughout the library and promote a culture of fun and innovation. Finally, staff development committees foster interdepartmental communication and enhance productivity.[2]

Gordon and Hartman believe that workplace friendships help with getting the work done and enhance the productivity of employees. They say that social relationships build trust; aiding in information sharing, organizational flexibility and increased problem solving. Furthermore, they say that workplace friendships develop coworker support, create a positive environment, and help to provide better communication among coworkers to complete assigned tasks.[3]

Employees use the "follow the leader concept." If a manager supports fun activities, staff will do the same. Karl et al. argue that levels of trust that individuals have in their managers and co-workers are also likely to influence their attitudes toward workplace perceptions and what they view as fun or acceptable environments. They say that trust is often connected with management in the workplace and it can only occur if it is encouraged and respected from the top. Organizations can only expect a certain level of trust when management takes control and sets the tone, supporting it when necessary.[4]

Dennis and Reina suggest that relationships develop through leaders demonstrating a strong sense of trust in people. In addition, they state that the practice of communicating trust helps a leader understand people better.[5]

Staff development committees provide a way for employees to connect

to the organization on a personal level, which takes the concept of work to another level. It means more than just showing up for work, according to Donovan and Figueroa.[6] They state that library managers can use staff development to involve employees in departmental projects that benefit employees by helping them to feel

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more involved and invested in the library as an institution unto itself. In return, staff involvement becomes deeply rooted in the tasks that keep the organization functioning.[7]

Group work, such as what occurs with staff development committees, builds communication skills which result in a more effective and meaningful organization, according to Jennerich. She states that committee work involves communication skills of all types, including skills such as managing meetings, working on task forces and gaining experience with facilitation tools that help groups reach consensus and decisions.[8]

Rockman argues that staff development activities that are considered fun make the work environment one which provides relaxation, laughter and a positive atmosphere to the organization. She explores how the following activities can enhance the work environment: sports tournaments, dress-up days, award ceremonies, contests, learn-at-lunch sessions and food-related events. These are all activities that promote workplace communication and engagement. Providing fun staff development activities can contribute to high workplace morale and a

productive library. In addition, she suggests that when organizations recognize the importance of humor, fun, teamwork, and camaraderie, a powerful message is sent to employees and patrons. She argues that personal attitude and motivation has a great deal to do with work performance.[9] Karl and others agree, supporting the notion

that fun plays a big role at work and is essential for enhancing employee motivation and productivity, reducing stress, and increasing customer satisfaction.[10]

Working as a Team

As technology advances, it strengthens the case for moving toward less personal contact among employees. The use of email, smart phones and other electronic devices reduces the lines of personal or face-to face communication. In large organizations (like Atkins Library) that are able to hire specific staff to handle more defined tasks, communication across departments is often absent. When organizations lack cross-departmental communication, workflows tend to lead to specific departments working independently of each other, which segregates relationships across the organization.

Building a healthy work environment takes collaborative work relationships within the organization and results in higher productivity. Those relationships can be built from staff development programs or committees that are made up of various departments and professional levels of the entire library staff.

J. Murrey Atkins Library

Atkins Library (University of North Carolina at Charlotte) created a Staff Development & Activities Committee to help solve communication problems between departments as well as to increase communication among library staff. In essence, the committee was charged to provide programs and activities to get staff to start talking to one another and to begin working together and functioning as a team. Like Davis and Lundstrom suggested, Atkins Library's goal fell under the category of relationships. The committee identified a quality in the organizational structure that needed to be repaired, and that was communication. While focusing on the organizational climate of the library, the Staff Development & Activities Committee created programs and activities that would encourage interaction between staff members by facilitating both professional development and team building activities.

Staff Development Activities and Programs

Coffee Conversations–This staff interaction event encourages communication among the entire library staff. It is a time to chat with colleagues and get to know each other over a cup of coffee or tea in a relaxed environment.

Out of the Box–This social event is designed to get staff to take a break from their everyday routine of eating lunch alone. The event encourages employees to get away from their desks and have lunch with fellow library employees. Staff participating in this event have gathered together to have lunch at various campus venues such as the campus gardens, staff and faculty dining halls and the Student Union.

Let's Talk Tech–This event encourages staff to meet with the Technology and Digital Strategies department to discuss technology related to the library and technology in our everyday lives.

Getting To Know You–This meet and greet event matches up library faculty and staff who want to get to know their co-workers. Participants of this activity meet in pairs for lunch, over coffee or at a neutral meeting place to chat about whatever subject they choose.

Self-Selected Group Development– This activity is designed to connect staff members who may share similar interests. The idea is to have staff identify any skill or interest they would like to pursue and see if other staff are interested in the same thing. They may have different purposes or goals for the skill but would like to learn and practice it together. With this activity, the Staff Development and Activities Committee offers a framework for meeting up with staff to complete a common goal. Some of the common interests include music, health and exercise, writing, knitting, learning a different language and home brewing.

The Welcome Wagon–This onboarding activity pairs new employees with existing employees as a way to help new hires become acclimated to their new workplace. Members of the Welcome Wagon have one primary role - to help new staff members feel welcome and comfortable at Atkins Library. Welcome Wagon members are asked to invite new employees to have lunch and/or coffee with them within their first month on the job. The Welcome Wagon activity serves as a relationship builder among library staff.

Conclusion

When libraries have large staffs with multiple departments and units, it is difficult to keep the organizational climate one that operates in an inclusive manner which promotes interdepartmental communication and interaction among the entire library staff. With the implementation of a staff development committee, communication issues among departments and staff working across various areas can be alleviated, making the work environment a place that encourages trust among employees and resulting in a more productive staff.

Based on the library literature on staff development initiatives, having such programs and activities in an organization has a positive impact on the entire library. As staff begin to interact through casual social settings, relationship building occurs and transforms the once segregated organizational units and departments into unified ones that blend departments in a way that employees are working, interacting and communicating as one. Implementing staff development programs and activities in organizations adds a unique component to the organizational foundation–one that reflects personal overtones in the work environment that soften the work climate. This allows employees to feel cared for, appreciated and motivated to perform in a positive manner, resulting in a healthy and productive work environment. Staff development initiatives do exactly what the title states, they develop staff to be the best that they can possibly be by emphasizing the positive impact that various forms of communication have on the workplace. With any organization, small gestures such as socializing, talking and mingling go a long way in terms of building a solid foundation to a positive organizational climate. Staff development committees and programs can provide the key to productivity, happiness and a healthy work environment.

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References

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