Managers' Strategies to Improve Dialogue with Classified

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The following represents one way to measure the college's work to improve classified members' understanding of and feelings of inclusion in planning at the college. The college asked managers to complete a short survey to gauge an understanding of what they hoped to accomplish with classified employees in spring 2011 to address areas of communication and dialogue (26 responded out of 69). Before, during and after the survey was sent to managers they were given explicit direction from the college President and Vice Presidents to be responsive to and cooperative of classified members' needs and involvement especially in program review. In summer 2011, a similar survey was sent to managers to determine what they did during spring and what barriers and limitations they faced (13 responded). Below are the questions as well as the findings.

- How will you implement systematic structures for effective communication and dialogue with classified employees?
- How will you create mechanisms for regular communication with classified employees regarding issues and local planning ideas being considered by the college?
- How will you include classified employees in their area's Planning for Institutional Effectiveness (PIE) processes?
- How will you create and maintain a positive institutional work environment for classified employees that values their contributions to committee work as part of their service?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

As pointed out by one manager, while doing this survey is of value, it would also be of value to ask classified their opinions and suggestions. Just such an event occurred in March 2011. Due to many factors outside the control of the research office, the analysis of the project was delayed. It will be analyzed and the report publically available before the end of the fall 2011 semester.

Facilitated a positive collaborative work environment

The following are actions that facilitate a positive collaborative work environment.

Meetings
Offer structured 5-minutes, 60-minutes, and intensive 3+ meetings (with rotating chairs) for longer periods of time to all for brainstorming ideas, developing solutions, and prioritizing action items. Follow-up discussions occur. Agenda is created by the group with college issues and planning as an item.

Meet formally at least once per month with each employee.

Create small task forces to solve a problem or create a new approach to something. Ask for volunteers. These task forces always include classified. Ensure they are free to volunteer for projects. Sometimes, they are invited to join a specific task force if their expertise is needed.

Encouraged classified team to think further about discussions and forward their thoughts and recommendations via e-mail or in person. Classified have the additional opportunity to share those "after thoughts" in subsequent meetings.

Communications/Dialogue

Use multiple modalities to keep classified staff aware of and allow dialogue about decisions, events, activities, and other information that may not normally be passed along through classified channels. Modalities used include newsletters, email, regular information briefings, open-door policy, and time for campus opening meetings and committees.

Use portal (group studio) for dialogue regarding relevant themes that come up which were not posted on the itinerary in advance.

Campus announcement emails are included in staff meetings.

Ask for input on specific goals, plans, policies, procedures and practices using small group and one-on-one interactions.

All staff may provide anonymous feedback via an "ask-the-dean" card which the dean responds to in the meeting or via email afterwards (if some research is required).

Bring classified members' perspectives to college-wide meetings as part of the recommendations for actions.

Work Environment

Reaffirm to the staff that their input is vital and important (committees and taskforces) and to continue providing a safe and secure learning environment within the campus community that fosters mutual respect.

Encourage classified to make their opinions known (e.g., college-wide request for survey response; attend CSEA chapter meetings).

Treat classified with respect and realize that they have stressors at home as well as at work. Flexibility is necessary.

PIE Work

The following indicates how managers included classified employees in their area's Planning for Institutional Effectiveness (PIE) processes.

Structured Meetings

Offer regular or annual planning summits to provide an opportunity for staff to think through issues and develop action items that are then translated into the PIE process. Staff members have the opportunity to see the outcomes of the planning summit meetings integrated into the PIE process, and then see the outcomes of the PIE process either through subsequent planning summit meetings or the regularly scheduled all-hands meetings. Classified are given leadership roles.

At staff meeting, agenda item is ongoing to discuss PIE and planned projects.

Employees were given a copy of the previous year's PIE submission for review then the group met to review changes and provide updates for this year's PIE. Classified were asked to be a member of the taskforce(s) to address these PIE tasks and were given leadership roles. Finally, all employees attended a staff meeting whereby they filled out PIE online with everyone contributing. Quick updates on the PIE progress were given periodically.

Committees
There is a need to encourage and support classified personnel to be involved in committee work across campus. How that involvement is encouraged by managers is noted below.

Involvement
Classified staff invited to serve on working groups and committees.

Work closely with leadership to ensure that committee responsibilities are shared across departments.

Develop appropriate ways to monitor time spent in committee work and set and hold to expectations on both sides. Once there is an understanding about time, managers and staff can concentrate on the good outcomes of the committee work and celebrate that good work. It is equally important for managers to then encourage, support, and praise the good work that gets done in support of the big picture (i.e., report out).

Managers encourage classified staff to serve on various committees that are meaningful to them.

News about committee opportunities is given at staff and department meetings, as well as by email.

The Continuing Education division collects evidence for a WASC self-study report (Adult School accreditation). Consequently, several members of the classified staff are participating in the process. This WASC study has provided additional opportunities for our classified to not only contribute as team members but also to lead program and

standard teams, themselves.

As an aside: Managers would like to know when opportunities are available for classified members to be on committees and the process for appointing them to committees so that managers may encourage their participation.

Limitations to dialogue

While it is important that all managers encourage and are receptive to dialogue by providing venues and opportunities for it, there are some issues that limit its success, such as managers who are not receptive to this issue and the following:

Staff don't seem to be comfortable speaking up in the larger group.

The ever-changing budget situation makes it difficult to give good, clear information about potential cuts in funding.

The spreading of false rumors creates a negative office environment.

Some employees are better than others about thoroughly reading their emails.

Perceived lack of trust makes it less likely for open dialogue to occur.

Having a large permanent part-time staff is a barrier in terms of adequate time to share and reflect on planning and communication.

All of us don't see the big picture – most wish to focus on depart-level work. However as interactions and discussions continue this becomes less and less of a limitation.

Lack of time is problematic. Lack of love of paperwork creates barriers.

Although there are no barriers, a limitation might be that team members prefer to concentrate on planning for their own work projects rather than campus initiatives.

Conclusion

Generally, it is clear that managers value and trust their classified employees and that managers offer many ways for communications and dialogue to occur. The findings from the current managers' study should be aligned with that from the CSEA Communications Summit as well as the Post-Accreditation Feedback study to help determine what should be the next steps to improve dialogue with classified employees.