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Modern information technology organizations have an obligation to focus their staff resources on their future employability rather than on current jobs. Skills sets must include adaptability to change, lifelong learning, service orientation, and responsiveness to the institution’s business needs. The success of the individual and the organization are interdependent—a true partnership.

University Computing Services, Indiana University, has made efforts to ensure this partnership at various levels. First, we invest in training and redefining reward systems centered on staff development and empowerment. Simultaneously, we emphasize and reward among staff the value of seizing professional growth opportunities and of balancing individual initiative with a teamwork orientation. The partnership extends beyond the departmental borders to other academic and administrative departments and technology vendors to make it work.

UCS attempts to maximize its resources by balancing funding for training for specific critical technical skills with that which creates a more flexible, responsive employee. Collaboration and partnership diminish the challenges of the rapid pace of change in the midst of budget restraints.
What is the Problem?

Over the past several years, the pace of change in the workplace has increased dramatically; not only in the information technology field, but in many others. Much of this change is driven by global competition, but it also comes from local and national competition, certainly in the higher education and health fields.

It is not news to any of us that the workplace of today is dramatically different from the workplace we faced upon graduation from college. Today’s graduates are expected to have multiple careers and jobs, as compared to our generation in which lifelong employment was more the norm. For today’s college graduates who have grown up in this fast-paced environment, this constant change may be more acceptable. However, for those of us who grew up in an earlier generation with expectations of more stability, the challenge may be greater.

Many of our older employees are perceived to have “outdated” skills, an unwillingness to learn new skills, and less energy than their younger counterparts. The younger employees are sometimes perceived to be undisciplined in the use of their “modern” technical skills, but bring creativity and energy to the workplace. These are gross generalizations, and all of us can cite many exceptions, but these perceptions do exist. So, another of the challenges we face is to retrain and re-energize one set of workers and bring discipline and planning to another group.

In the modern higher education community, there is increasing pressure to make information technology more relevant to the mission of the enterprise as well. Technology, once considered primarily a tactical tool for automation of tedious or impossible tasks, is now expected to add value to more strategic initiatives and core competencies of the university. Technology has also become much more pervasive in the university community, thereby increasing the demands for support.

All of these changes require much more of a collaborative attitude between manager/employee, manager/manager, technology provider/customer and senior management/administration of university. This differs from earlier years in which technology providers were the “experts”, and the main product they delivered was “technology”.

First Steps

These challenges and problems were really brought home to us with the hiring of a new Associate Vice President for Information Technology at Indiana University a few years ago. He brought a private sector perspective to our department which we had not seen before. The terms collaboration, cooperation, and ability to change rapidly became common within our environment. For some employees these were welcome changes and natural inclinations, but for others these terms were difficult to place in the context of a technical organization.

However, a basic shift in management philosophy began to take place in the Spring of 1994. Transitions were made in the senior management ranks, and senior managers were rotated to new and different areas of responsibility. The expectation was that all senior managers would broaden their breadth of understanding of the organization and its services in order to focus on strategic planning. One of the major challenges was to redirect our services for support of the university’s strategic mission and goals.

In the past, in many cases, the managerial ranks represented positions for promotions for highly valued technical staff members without managerial training or inclination. Our focus turned to
hiring/promoting managers, assistant directors, and directors with “soft skills”, such as people management, service orientation, and a cooperative attitude in working with co-workers and customers. In recognition of the core competencies necessary to remain competitive--keeping close to customers, staying on top of technology and market trends, and striving to be ever more flexible!--the new senior manager was to be a role model, embracing, modeling, facilitating change and exerting constructive influence when working with others.

Indiana University has a broad-based training program within the Human Resources department featuring training specialists who have taught in major technical firms across the country. We were able to take advantage of their expertise in conducting programs on managing change, first in a session for the Associate V.P. along with the senior managers, followed by a larger group in which other managers and team leaders participated.

As a part of this training, managers were asked to commit to the concept that “the employer and the employee share responsibility for maintaining--even enhancing--the individual’s employability inside and outside the department.” Staff development became the primary objective for all managers, emphasizing their “responsibility ...to show that they care about their employees ...[t]he result is a group of self-reliant workers--or a career resilient workforce.”

Barriers

Obviously, changes in management philosophy of this magnitude do not come about without resistance or turmoil. Coupled with impending budget cuts, several layoffs and the threat of more, morale reached a new low. With the natural resistance to change, new leadership had a very different approach, and the climate became quite intense. Even recognizing the need to respond to constantly changing technology, some directions were seemingly mandated without sufficient technical scrutiny or solid foundation, or at least without staff being able to see the “burning platform” from which they needed to plunge or not survive. (Conner, Managing at the Speed of Change) For some staff the change from the idea of being a technology organization to one which focused on the business needs of the institution was also difficult.

Growing distrust of management due to cutbacks, poor communication, and lack of dialogue placed a barrier to our incipient partnership. Cynicism was a common attitude and rumors spread ferociously, making it an uphill battle.

Things which worked

The senior management team then worked closely together to produce an internal paper, “The Organization and Employee of the Future: And the Future is Now!” in which traditional principles of employment were pronounced dead. The organization of the future could only support continued employment for those jobs that contribute to the stated goals of the organization, placing immediate demands on incumbents to become employees of the future--committed to those goals, adapting to change with multiple skills (Schoff, “The Decade of the Disposable Employee”).

For our partnership to be credible, management had to accept its obligations as well. Communicating organizational direction and engaging in dialogue, facilitating a professional growth plan and providing opportunities to achieve those development objectives for staff members became essential elements of the manager’s tasks.
Fortunately, UCS already had a well-defined performance review process which included goal setting. An attempt was made to incorporate measurable goals into this process, with new focus on individual initiative and service orientation as well as professional growth. Since managers were rated on the basis of their success in developing staff they allocated time, tools and training dollars to ensure employees achieved professional growth goals. Performance review ratings and merit increases reflected this success or lack of it for both manager and staff member.

Attempting these new measures in the midst of pressing deadlines, and demands for more services with fewer resources, created a broader partnership resulting in greater cross-unit cooperation among groups, and a magnified focus on the success of the organization as opposed to the individual.

We instituted a feedback questionnaire process to evaluate our success at instilling service orientation among our staff. Defining customer broadly, we solicited feedback from internal colleagues as well as external clients. Managers used the results to help identify employee strengths or need for further development. Although still in need of refinement, both external recipients and our own staff strongly support the concept.

We researched and purchased more in-house training. A technical leader would preview training off-site (involving travel, lodging and per diem in addition to the course registration) and make recommendations enabling us to bring the same class on-site for as many as 20 people at less than $1,000 per person. We extended this partnership by inviting external customers with similar just in time training needs to participate in these sessions.

Reallocating monies to create a Staff Retraining Fund, we began to acquire a library of learning and assessment tools. UCS Staff members longed to participate in our Education Program’s Certification classes intended for technical support providers of the local departments in PC/Intel, DOS/Windows and LAN/Networking technologies. Strengthening an already solid partnership, UCS Human Resources encouraged the offering to local support providers the CBT (computer-based tutorial) courseware purchased by the staff retraining fund for our own staff. In return, extra sessions of the Ed Cert were established for UCS staff members; we served as the testing (if not totally appropriate) audience, for these new series of advanced technical training.

A local Toastmasters club was formed to enable employees to become more comfortable in making presentations, with the side benefit of developing camaraderie across various units. This activity provides leadership skills-building opportunities for staff members at all levels who had exchanged e-mail but never met.

Supporting the concept of enhancing each staff member’s future employability, we promoted the Staff Development Fund for grants to staff members who wished to pursue learning opportunities related to technology, but outside their current job responsibilities.

On the managerial side, senior managers and directors attended executive training/leadership conferences and classes, such as IBM’s Executive Training Center in Palisades, NY. Senior management was encouraged, and funds provided, to attend national meetings to keep abreast of changes and directions in computing in higher education. The idea of forming partnerships with various vendors to leverage scarce resources was stressed, and several important partnerships were formed.

A short list of priority strategic projects were identified, and cross-divisional teams were formed to develop both tactical and long-term solutions to deliver the services resulting from these initiatives.
Staff with a variety of skills and backgrounds came together with common goals which had been set at the highest levels of the organization. By tying these initiatives to the strategic directions of the University as well, it was hoped that employees would begin to see how their work tied to the mission of the University.

A staff survey was distributed to all employees seeking input into what they liked least/best and what they would like to change or add. Interestingly, yet not surprisingly, what some staff members liked most was the constant challenge of being presented with change, while for others that was what they liked least. We realize our challenge is to continue to present the reality of change while attempting to identify and reduce the stress agents inherent in our environment. (Munz, “Helping Employees Manage the Stress of Wording in Higher Education”) We can also empower our staff by teaching them resilience allowing them to maximize their assimilation points for dealing with change, and minimize their usage each time they confront it. (Conner, Managing at the Speed of Change) Communication is the primary means of accomplishing these goals.

We have instituted various forums to enhance communication such as a monthly meeting of all managers and senior level staff designed to be a two-way communication forum. We have had a variety of casual get togethers for holidays, summer celebrations, and staff recognition that seem to be well received and provide an avenue for casual conversations among all levels of the organization. We must continue to analyze what works and what doesn’t and be willing to modify as we receive feedback on these programs.

It’s Never Finished!!

Since there is no silver bullet on the technology end, our goal was and is to enrich each employee’s skillset with habits and behaviors that enable them to continue to learn and adapt, thus cope more easily with the stresses with which they are faced. In turn, we have made a strong commitment to employees willing to learn new technologies or methods, who demonstrate qualities of collaboration, and who continue to exhibit the ability to adjust to change.

All of this has not been without its difficulties and continues to be a struggle for all of us. Stress in the workplace is discussed in many articles and journals, and having seen it and its effects first hand, it is a very real concern for us. We work closely and individually with employees to accommodate their personal needs. We have granted leaves of absence enabling staff members to write books, pursue musical interests, and spend more time with family members.

Our efforts to promote staff employability have contributed to our losing staff members with critical market skills they obtained while working with us. Interestingly enough, some of these valued ex-employees are extending feelers, even formally applying, to work again within our organization. While we are taking a hard look at our compensation policies and variable pay options, we are also concentrating on enhancing other factors that make a job attractive and encourage commitment from employees. For excellent staff, an environment that offers challenge, cultivates growth opportunity and encourages feedback and dialogue can offset even the most attractive salary offer.

In the midst of the restructuring of our department, our Associate V.P. For Information Technology resigned, and a new Vice President for Information Technology will join us in January 1997. What will this mean in the way of change for the organization? In an attempt to be proactive while in-between permanent leaders, and reacting to the staff survey indicating that we needed to
articulate our direction more clearly, we chose 6 non-managerial staff members for a task force to revisit and revise, if appropriate, the UCS Mission and Values statements. Empowering staff was central to the new departmental mission, and the task force learned the meaning of empowerment from both the positive aspects of partnering and from the frustrating even overwhelming attempts to gain acceptance for their document from their colleagues. This group not only drafted but also presented new statements first to senior management, then to other managers and team leaders.

So, change seems to be inevitable in today’s society, both personal and professional; we learned a lot about what works and what doesn’t. However, we can’t assume that even these experiences will hold true in the future. It would be nice if we could say, we studied it, we made changes and we’re all done, but in order to be successful as an organization, we are challenged to continually survey the staff, make corrections in our approaches, and listen, listen, listen, and communicate, communicate, communicate!

References:


Endnotes:


2. Ibid., p. 87-88.

3. Ibid., p. 88.