

CUPA-HR eNews

Transforming Staff-Faculty Relationships: Progress in Closing the Great Divide

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Working relationships between staff and faculty are a pillar on which the success of every college and university depends. But often these crucial interdependent relationships are overlooked or poorly understood, and most HR professionals know too well that they can become thorny – or worse. Because the challenges of staff and faculty working effectively and harmoniously together are as old and familiar as higher education itself, many institutions feel there is nothing they can do to improve the situation on their campus. But HR is powerfully positioned to help launch and support innovative initiatives with potential to change faculty-staff campus culture for the better, and HR leaders on campuses across the country are starting to see a path forward to better staff-faculty mutual understanding and cooperation.

Defining the Challenges

Before entering “problem-solving” mode, it is helpful to articulate the challenges HR staff may face when attempting to facilitate respectful staff-faculty working relationships. These challenges may include:

- HR staff may not understand academic structure and culture or how staff-faculty relationships are different from work relationships in most other organizations.
- HR staff may not be skilled and comfortable in their own working relationships with academics (faculty, researchers, department chairs, deans).
- Faculty may not understand HR’s role or how HR staff can help them. If faculty members do not see how an HR initiative serves their immediate academic goals, they may view it as irrelevant, a burden, a distraction, and a drain on their limited time and effort.
- Faculty are almost inevitably not trained in management, directing and supporting staff, giving feedback, performance evaluations, etc. Yet their jobs often require them to perform these crucial functions. They

may not see the importance of clarifying staff expectations, communicating more skillfully and supporting staff members' development.

- Staff members across campus sometimes feel unappreciated, frustrated or confused in their work with faculty.
- Staff may feel isolated in their role of supporting faculty members and need resources that HR can provide for their growth and development. They simply may not know how to communicate with faculty in professional settings.
- Academic traditions and norms often contribute to the staff-faculty divide. Old, engrained patterns do not change easily.

An Exciting Beginning at Lehigh

In 2011, Lehigh University reaffirmed its commitment to fostering an environment that is accepting and collaborative, and its commitment to diversity, inclusion and engagement has never been stronger. That commitment was captured in "[Principles of Our Equitable Community](#)" which fundamentally serves as the foundation of the university community. Lehigh believes that every community member has a personal responsibility to acknowledge and practice the nine basic principles found in this document.

Over the years, Lehigh University's Employee Relations Advisory Committee (ERAC), a representative group of elected staff members, has deliberated on how to address the desire of staff members to be more fully appreciated by their faculty colleagues. More recently, in partnership with human resources and the provost's office, ERAC has initiated some important approaches to addressing what is sometimes experienced as faculty rankism, indifference and, in the worst cases, downright incivility.

In July 2011, ERAC and HR invited Susan Christy to spend two days on campus [training](#) more than 100 staff members in working effectively with faculty, managing in an academic environment and customer service strategies in an academic environment. Lehigh's deputy provost for faculty affairs attended the Working Effectively With Faculty session to gain staff perspective and learn more about the research. Participants appreciated the chance to share their experiences and best practices with one another and left the trainings with enthusiasm and new strategies to work with faculty and partner with one another across campus. In their program assessments, participants offered suggestions about how to follow up with faculty so that they would understand the importance of working effectively with staff.

With staff energized and armed with strategies for improvement, it was time to address faculty. Lehigh's ERAC representatives, HR and deputy provost for academic affairs met with the Provost's Council (the provost and the

deans of Lehigh's four colleges) and other senior academic and student affairs officers to discuss the following questions:

- What kinds of activities are in place now within your area to promote better understanding among faculty of the importance of working effectively with staff?
- What would be effective ways to engage the faculty in your college in a heightened appreciation and understanding of the value of working effectively with staff?

The Provost's Council members immediately related to this topic and as a first step advised the subcommittee to work with each college dean. The group has reached out to the deans of each of the colleges to facilitate a conversation at an upcoming department chairs meeting. As expected, the responses during these meetings thus far have varied in tenor and content. Some chairs said this initiative is a great idea and seemed to be ready to champion it with their faculty. Some acknowledged the differences in perspectives in staff-faculty relationships in their departments. The active involvement of the deputy provost for academic affairs in the group's activities has provided an advocate from the senior faculty ranks. The group is planning follow-up meetings with the Provost's Council and each college during the fall 2012 semester, and the topic will be addressed at upcoming new academic department chair and new faculty orientation programs.

Coincidentally, or perhaps because awareness of the power differences among staff, faculty and students has grown on campus, this fall the Department of Theatre in conjunction with the Zoellner Arts Center will be performing *Oleanna*, a two-character play by David Mamet, about the power struggle between a university professor and one of his female students. It examines power differences and how one person can powerfully impact another. And deepening discussion of similar themes, several campus departments and organizations, including HR and ERAC, have collaborated to invite Robert Fuller, author of *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank*, to lead discussions among students, staff and faculty about power difference, gender equity and rankism on campus.

The conversation seems to be moving forward in a constructive way at Lehigh University. Although change will likely come slowly, both staff and faculty will benefit from more skillful collaborative working relationships.

What Can You, as an HR Person, Do on Your Campus?

Creating culture change often begins with bringing long-standing issues and opportunities to light for members of the community. How can you increase awareness of staff-faculty relationship issues on campus and promote collaboration, respectful communication and appreciation of the gifts and talents of every contributor? Here are some possible approaches:

- **Highlight successful staff-faculty relationships.** Look for opportunities to recognize excellent staff-faculty working relationships on your campus. Colleges and universities often recognize individual staff and faculty members' achievements on their websites, in publications and at campus events. Many of these instances can easily be transformed into celebrating the partnerships between staff and faculty.
- **Create principles of community** for your campus and/or strengthen the application of your existing principles. Post the principles prominently around campus and on your website, encourage others to refer to the principles often, and consider the principles a contract/commitment for both staff and faculty when mediating campus conflicts.
- **Help HR staff understand academia and faculty and communicate more professionally with academics** (see insights and suggestions below).
- **Create opportunities for HR staff to promote mutual understanding and collaboration between staff and faculty.**
- **Upgrade your staff training.** Plan your staff and management trainings to include specifics about academia, faculty priorities and work styles, how to anticipate faculty needs and communicate professionally with faculty, and how to work as a campus-wide team to support faculty. Encourage external trainers and consultants to customize their approaches for academia and your campus.
- **Expand your faculty leadership training.** Help faculty to manage their staff-faculty relationships effectively, learn collaboration and delegation skills, and discuss the two mindsets (and expectations) about organizational structure.
- **Consider new chair orientation.** Help academic department chairs understand more about how to manage faculty and support collegial and respectful staff-faculty partnerships. You may find department chairs to be conflict-averse. They may need support or encouragement to take a stand against inappropriate faculty behavior.
- **Orient new employees to academia and work with faculty.** Help new staff employees understand academia and how it is different from working in the private sector, how to understand and work effectively with faculty, and how to create a team with other staff members across campus.
- **Work with academic leadership** — the president, provost, deans, department chairs and key faculty members (and committees) — **to**

increase awareness, update traditional outdated norms, and provide leadership and collaboration skills.

Further Insights for Your Path Ahead

Trying to control or change faculty members (or anyone!) is likely to be counter-productive. We're learning that when we want to change others, it's usually beneficial to look at our part of the interactions. This is true for HR staff and for all staff – professional, administrative, technical, clinical, maintenance, etc.

These typical staff questions we've come across at Lehigh point to ways they would like to elicit different faculty responses:

- How can we get faculty to respect us as professionals in our own right?
- How can we get timely responses to legitimate administrative requests?
- How can we convince faculty members we can help them? How can we demonstrate our valuable experience and resources?
- How can we engage faculty in the goals and decisions of their department or research institute?

Although some faculty may sometimes communicate in a "one-up" way, it's essential for staff not respond in a "one-down" way. Generally, when anyone (especially someone with more power) acts "one-up," the other person feels defensive or intimidated and behaves "one-down." Acting in a subservient or apologetic way is often a self-fulfilling prophesy. It does not build respect or lead to faculty responsiveness or collaboration. Here are a few suggestions for all staff when working directly with faculty.

- Be clear about the value of your staff role and contributions to faculty members and the institution.
- Adopt the mindset of an equal colleague who respects both yourself and the faculty member.
- Be clear about the purpose and your desired outcome of each interaction with a faculty member.
- Communicate with faculty members "straight across," not from "one-down" to "one-up." Behave as a professional. Stand a little taller, and then communicate "eye-to-eye" or, we might say, "I-to-I". Focus on working together to meet mutual goals. Non-verbal messages are powerful here.

- Add an appropriate note of respect and deference, acknowledging a faculty member's time constraints, years of education and the importance of their work.
- Be proactive in setting the tone of the relationships.

The challenge of bridging the faculty-staff divide need not be so daunting after all. Lehigh University has found some effective pathways. In the end, it is important to remember that it is the mission of your college or university that is at the center and so all community members, whatever their campus roles may be, contribute to the institution's success. By understanding and strengthening these interdependent relationships, the divide may not seem so wide after all.

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