

Successfully running a peer-to-peer learning space

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Abstract:

This piece describes how the author engages employees in order to develop a steward mentality among her tutors. She believes that emphasizing stewardship and satisfaction lead to a staff more willing to take on tasks and who have a stronger commitment to the center itself.

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Article:

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As the newly hired director of a speaking center in its second year at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, I was faced with the enormous task of establishing a strong center ethos on campus. In doing so I would have to recruit and train student staff, earn faculty buy in, educate the campus about our services, brand our support as being of high value to administrators, and put into place an organizational structure to support our work. The best thing I did as I prepared to step into the directing position was to attend a peer tutoring conference and to reflect on best practices for creating the right environment for training tutors. I left the conference with a genuine commitment to supporting our undergraduate peer consultants as *they did the work* of our learning space. My support, I felt, had to include the cultivation of an office/organizational culture of care. This care would extend beyond care for the speakers we enter into dialogue with; it had to include care for the peer consultants themselves. Looking back, I believe that the commitments to support and care are directly linked to the successful running of this particular peer-to-peer learning space.

I shared the commitments to supporting our student-staff and cultivating an ethic of care with our new graduate assistant on her first day of work. We quickly realized that the best way for us to do both was to step back and let the consultants do their work with an eye to identifying ways to help. We would look to implement new practices, policies, and paper forms in ways that avoided

our being perceived as managing from the top down. Instead we would work shoulder-to-shoulder with our undergraduate consultants. We would seek their voices in solving problems and ask for feedback about operations. When we first addressed our peer educators we clearly communicated what we expected of them and identified what they could expect of us.

This support and care approach influenced our organizational communication. Our graduate assistant and I had extensive Friday afternoon meetings each week. During the meetings we shared what we saw and experienced, and identified areas of potential tension. Next, we sought to discover ways that we could be a part of helping our student employees to resolve these issues. We were deliberate in our use of inclusive language when we spoke about our learning space and when we spoke to our peer consultants. We taught them to do the same. For example we would talk about "our services" and "our peer consultants" instead of saying "my consultants" or "my center." What was going on in this learning space was far bigger than any one person.

We sought to maintain a kind, friendly, and cooperative workplace where our peer consultants could develop their professionalism. Our potlucks, game nights, committee projects, and Friday lunch gatherings would lead to our peer consultants leaving candy and genuine expressions of appreciation (for the support they got from one another) in everyone's mailbox. Consultants would later refer to the whole staff as their "Speaking Center family" and email messages seeking shift coverage were signed "Speaking Center Lov." Our ethic of care practices quickly cultivated a community of practice.

We believed that support and care led to satisfied employees. More satisfaction led to more willingly taking on tasks, and stronger commitment to the Center itself. In a recent *Forbes Magazine* blog posting, contributor Roger Dean Duncan of Duncan Worldwide states that "commitment thrives in an atmosphere of mutual purpose, mutual respect, and high levels of physiological ownership. In other words, engagement. Workers are engaged when they feel part of decisions that affect them. When they feel trusted. When they feel free (safe) in speaking up about issues that matter" (2014, p. 2). Given this, we realize now that the particular choices we were making were actually achieving employee engagement.

Duncan goes on to say that engaged employees develop a steward mentality. Stewards do the right thing all of the time, are proactive, resourceful, willingly adapt fast when conditions change, and are assertive. We have further found that our most highly engaged employees, the peer managers, are extremely loyal. Our support and care efforts have certainly led to stewardship.

The time we spend on fostering employee engagement far outweighs the cost of employee disengagement. Deliberately supporting the students who do our work and fostering a genuine ethic of care is what we do right, and where our focus should be if our peer-to-peer learning space is to remain successful.

Reference

Duncan, R. D. (2014, August 2). Why employee satisfaction is the wrong metric. [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/rodgerdeanduncan/2014/08/02/why-employee-satisfaction-is-the-wrong-metric/>