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ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANTS

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Building bridges

Interdepartmental collaboration is critical

Question:

"A co-worker passed along your column, 'Building Bridges: Meet with Other Departments to Clarify Expectations' from the Oct. 16 issue of *BizTimes Milwaukee.* It was relevant to our situation. We work in the financial aid department in a college. The divide between faculty and staff is huge. It's like you're a second-class citizen if you're not faculty. Some of the faculty members are rude and condescending. How do you 'build bridges' with people like that?"

Answer:

This is a great question. Thanks for sending it. In this column I'll offer some bridge building techniques that might be helpful.

Before I do that, though, let me observe that there is no silver bullet or easy answer for the situation you describe.

In simple terms, you are confronted with a hierarchical, power-based culture. This is true of most professional bureaucracies (e.g., law firms, hospitals, accounting practices, engineering firms, etc.). Colleges and universities fall into this grouping. Further, the manner in which the typical college or university is structured has nearly 1,000 years of history.

Specifically, the modern college or university can trace its roots to 1088 when the University of Bologna came into existence. That's a long time to practice, "faculty are first." There's a lot of rigidity in the university model. You're not going to change that overnight. But, as one of my colleagues likes to observe, some faculty do need to be shaken from the misguided belief that God created the world in three-credit blocks.

Let me offer another contextual point: the university professor at your institution is analogous to the line worker in a manufacturing plant. They both are "hands on" with regard to the service or good/product that the organization offers to its customers. That the primary service providers within professional bureaucracies are highly credentialed experts differentiates them from their counterparts in other similarly configured organizations, though. Clearly, there is a big difference between a university professor and an assembly line worker. Just ask them. They'll tell you all about it.

> "The challenge, in essence, is to help all members of the organizational system to clearly see how what they're doing adds value."

The challenge, in essence, is to help all members of the organizational system to clearly see how what they're doing adds value. All members of the organization need to see how what they do helps the institution deliver on its "moment of mission" when a faculty member interacts with students. Let's face it, without the staff to support them and the students, the faculty could not do their jobs. That's not even arguable.

When a faculty member walks into the classroom to offer instruction, a host of people have made that possible. Building/facility operations have cleaned the classroom. Financial aid and the business office have worked with the students regarding fees and tuition. Technology has ensured that the proper teaching tools are there. Advisors have counseled students regarding course choices. Administration has secured the necessary resources to keep the doors open, offer compensation and benefits, position the institution in the marketplace, and maintain relationships with the institution's key constituents. Finally, the faculty member has prepared himself or herself to deliver the appropriate instruction relative to the subject matter associated with the session of the course that is being offered.

So, the faculty member does not "fly alone above the fray." Nor do health care providers in hospitals, lawyers in law firms, accountants in accounting firms, engineers in engineering firms, architects in architectural firms, etc. Let's be clear on that point. While these highly credentialed and subject matter proficient professionals are the foundation of the organization,

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for them to do their best work, they need to be linked and aligned with the other work areas of the organization and the employees that populate them

Over the years, we have done a great deal of work with professional services organizations in our consulting practice. Much of it has been in the kind of situation you describe. We've helped our clients "tear down silos" by highlighting interdependencies, establishing reciprocal partnerships, and fueling feelings of camaraderie and positive esprit de corps as opposed to derision and divisiveness.

If your institution wants to really address the situation you describe, then the prescription is to engage in a large group change initiative. For this to happen, executive leadership needs to get involved to sponsor and situate the initiative. Given your role in the institutional hierarchy, what you might do is work with your boss so he or she can surface this issue, in conjunction with other supervisors or managers, so that it shows up on the institutional radar screen with which the executives are concerned.

Presupposing that the executives get behind the initiative, in practice it might look something like this:

Step one: Structured discussion

Public discussion with key stakeholders, ideally altogether, all at once (i.e., getting the whole system in the room"). If this is not feasible, then the suggestion is to engage in a series of meetings. Facilitated discussion of the key issue(s) (i.e., How do we go about breaking down communication barriers by creating a more open, positive communication climate at our institution?").

Step two: Grouping the Issues

Inevitably, patterns or themes will emerge from the discussion points that surface in step one, above. These issues need to be categorized and the sub-issues that comprise them need to be captured, as well.

Step three: Preliminary action planning

Step three involves turning attention to taking action relative to the themes or categories that were identified in Step two. It is typical to involve people who have a stake in the issue to be given authority to map out a preliminary action plan. Ideally, these participants represent multiple work area and organizational strata. This demonstrates that, "we're all in this together."

Step four: Following up on action items

Once the preliminary action plans from step three, above, have been vetted by the executive sponsors, the next step is to take formal action. Properly executed the process should be to: (1) get the right people (i.e., interdisciplinary teams) together for blocks of focused, uninterrupted time, (2) work on high priority problems or opportunities that they have identified, (3) work in ways that are structured to enhance the likelihood of realistic solutions and action plans, (4) implement the plans enthusiastically, (5) evaluate actual versus expected results, and (6) make fine tuning adjustments and continue the work.

Finally, let me note that because this is a complex process that needs to done well, it might be worthwhile to engage an external consultant for assistance with process consulting. A skilled consultant can add value by working with individuals and groups to help them effectively pursue the interpersonal processes (e.g., team-based approaches, interdisciplinary interactions, conflict resolution, etc.) and solve problems that stem from process events. ■

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