Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Using Evidence in Practice

Rethinking Staff Development Needs During COVID-19

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Setting

Wayne State University (WSU) is an urban, public research university located in the Midwestern United States. WSU has 13 schools and colleges offering approximately 350 academic programs and serving over 26,000 students. The Wayne State University Library System (WSULS) includes the David Adamany Undergraduate Library, the Arthur Neef Law Library, the Purdy/Kresge Library, the Vera P. Shiffman Medical Library and its Learning Resource Center at the Eugene Applebaum College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, and the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, and University Archives. Additionally, the School of Information Sciences and the Detroit Area Library Network are under the Library System's charge. The Library System employs around 120 full-time and 60 part-time staff across all units.

Problem

Beginning in 2017 under the direction of a new Dean of Libraries, the WSULS adopted a new strategic focus and reframed our work around four visionary pillars: Student Success, Community Engagement, Scholarship, and Organization and Culture. To support our focus on Organization and Culture, the Library System began a concerted effort to focus on organizational development (OD) initiatives and positive culture change within the libraries. OD strategies can be classified under the following areas: organizational effectiveness, organizational structure, ongoing performance and productivity initiatives, and organizational learning (Society for Human Resource Management,

n.d.). In full support of this initiative, the Dean of Libraries enabled the transition of an existing librarian to a new OD Coordinator role and the hiring of an OD Consultant. From 2017 to early 2020, this new OD team led several system-wide initiatives. Both the OD Coordinator and Consultant were Gallup-certified strengths coaches (Gallup, 2021). Accordingly, the CliftonStrengths assessment (Gallup, 1999) and one-on-one coaching were offered to every staff member. In 2019, the OD team facilitated a year-long in-house Leadership Series that covered a variety of topics, including effective communication, building cohesive teams, managing conflict productively, emotional intelligence, building networks, presentation skills, and leading effective meetings. Separate sessions were held for existing leaders (those with direct reports) and influential leaders (those without direct reports) with the intent of providing a safe space for staff to share.

In order to meet the needs of our users in an ever-changing information environment, the OD team, including the Dean of Libraries, focused on Senge's model of learning organizations, which are described as "organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization" (1990, p. 4). These efforts are intended to support everyone from student assistants to senior administration and require a wide range of topics and strategies based on the needs of the individual staff members. Many libraries have utilized the learning organization model including, but not limited to, the University of Arizona, Illinois' North Suburban Library System, the University of California, Stanford University, and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (Giesecke & McNeil, 2004). Senge's (1990) model is based on five characteristics:

1. Systems Thinking: seeing the connections and interrelationships within an organization.

2. Personal Mastery: "the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively" (Senge, 1990, p. 7). This represents a personal commitment to lifelong learning and achieving a high level of proficiency.

3. Mental Models: our assumptions and generalizations that influence how we understand or interpret our organizations.

4. Shared Vision: members of the organization creating a picture of how the organization will look in the future together.

5. Team Learning: setting aside assumptions and creating an open environment for dialogue and discussion. The ways in which a team interacts can be a barrier to learning. Recognizing these patterns can help a team grow and adapt, which is fundamental to organizational success. This process increases the capacity for a team to create its desired results.

From the beginning of this new initiative at WSULS, the entire design centered on the in-person working environment, as the Library System did not have a culture of remote work. In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began to impact higher education and in March, the Library System was forced to transition to a primarily remote work environment. As with most of the world, we suddenly found ourselves needing to transition our work to this new reality.

The OD team quickly realized we would need to rethink our ongoing work, as priorities in the Library System were upended and we needed to address an entirely new set of needs. OD work can have a direct impact on an organization's agility. According to Aghina and De Smet (2015), "agility is the ability of an organization to renew itself, adapt, change quickly, and succeed in a rapidly changing,

ambiguous, turbulent environment" (para. 2). Having an existing OD team allowed us to address these new needs immediately, helping the Library System to quickly adapt and meet the unexpected challenges we faced and helping us to thrive during a global pandemic.

Evidence

The OD team regularly seeks staff input on completed sessions, desires of staff, and overall perceptions of the system's culture. A desire for staff development initiatives had long been expressed and supported by several internal staff surveys. Upon completion of the 2019 Leadership Series, all staff were invited to participate in a survey intended to better understand the perceptions of the series, as well as inform our planning for future initiatives. The survey was completed by 58 participants; 69.6% indicated that they had attended at least one of the sessions. Additionally, we found that 34.4% attended 1-2 sessions, 12.5% attended 3-4 sessions, 25% attended 5-6 sessions, 18.8% attended 7-8 sessions, and 9.4% attended 9 or more sessions. Of the participants who shared their reasons for not attending, most indicated that they had scheduling conflicts that prevented them from attending. The most beneficial sessions, according to survey participants, were those on communication, managing conflict, and the introductory session on defining leadership. The least beneficial sessions were on diversity and inclusion, and presentation skills. The vast majority of respondents indicated a strong desire for the team to continue hosting a similar series. The most common suggestions for new topics centered on self-development and professional development opportunities.

With the sudden transition to remote work during the pandemic, staff at all levels were expressing concern and uncertainty about this new way of operating. Not only were staff concerned with finding ways to do their work remotely, but they were also concerned with childcare and schooling issues, the health and wellbeing of family members, and the overall stress associated with living through a pandemic. Managers and the OD team were often contacted with requests for support and resources, ranging from scheduling and shifting work priorities to technological barriers and stress management assistance.

It was clear from the vocal staff, as well as from library administration, that we needed to transition our OD work to focus on these new pressing issues. We needed to support staff in transitioning to remote work, maintaining their well-being, and socially connecting now that they were unable to meet face-to-face, eat lunch together, or simply cross paths.

Implementation

In response to the pandemic and our new remote work environment, the OD team quickly implemented several new initiatives. First, with support from our marketing team and administration, we began hosting weekly all-staff Town Hall meetings. These Town Halls served as a vehicle for library leadership to share information and address staff concerns. In the early days of the pandemic, we invited a human resources leader to dialogue with staff and three library leaders from China to share their experiences reopening their libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic. These Town Halls continue to be hosted, although now with less frequency.

In the first week of April 2020, the OD team began a brief series of virtual sessions called "Managing Our Work During COVID-19" to share best practices and our individual experiences of working remotely. The OD team began each session sharing the most current updates on the pandemic, as well as several strategies and resources for staff wellbeing and productivity, including tips on how to structure their day and strategies for eliminating distractions. Staff were also encouraged to share their experiences.

In June 2020, we hosted our first in-house virtual conference. We invited proposals from all staff members and accepted 24 sessions that

lasted an entire week. There was no specified theme for the conference in order to encourage participation from all staff, with topics ranging from mindfulness and imposter syndrome to library publishing and linking to electronic resources. In several cases we had first-time presenters, and the OD team worked with them to develop their sessions.

Outcome

Prior to the pandemic, attendance to our in-person sessions varied greatly. Depending on the topic of the session, we could have as many as 30 attendees or as few as three. In contrast, our new virtual sessions typically have at least 30 attendees. Through a follow-up survey and personal correspondence, staff expressed that these sessions were beneficial in content as well as in providing a venue in which to connect with colleagues. We believe that the increase in attendance can also be attributed to the sessions' accessibility since staff no longer have to travel across campus to attend them in person. From the earliest sessions, the OD team recognized the opportunity that exists in hosting virtual sessions. While we are still primarily operating remotely, we anticipate continuing to offer virtual sessions when we return to campus.

For several of our staff members, the virtual conference was their first experience presenting and for others it was their first time attending a conference. Unlike the librarians, many of our support staff do not have travel budgets, so the cost of attending a typical in-person conference presents a significant barrier. This barrier becomes increasingly problematic for support staff who are interested in furthering their career in the information professions or who are also working on their MLIS. By offering an in-house free virtual conference, we removed these barriers and provided new opportunities for staff.

Several staff members have expressed in meetings and personal correspondence that

they feel a more "personal" connection with their colleagues. In addition to remote work often giving you a literal view into a coworker's home, several of our activities have included sharing personal stories and interests.

Reflection

When developing our OD efforts, we considered how they fit into the learning organization model. For example, our Leadership Series had sessions to help staff improve skills and progress their own personal mastery. The "Managing Our Work During COVID-19" series helped our transition to a remote work environment by allowing staff to think about our mental models and our shared vision for the organization during the pandemic. The virtual conference provided us an opportunity to focus on team learning in a new way for our organization.

While we believe that these efforts to adjust to the pandemic and the new remote work environment were successful, there are still further adjustments and improvements that can be made. Culture change can be a slow process and each successful project moves the organization closer to our shared vision. Another important point is that staff development initiatives are never a one-size-fits-all approach; what works for one institution may not work for another and what impacts one individual may not impact another.

An additional challenge we faced was that, despite repeated calls from staff for more opportunities to gather and share information, few individuals suggested topics or were willing to facilitate these meetings. This may impact the sustainability of these initiatives over time. This has been less of an issue to date, as our needs changed fairly often as we came to understand the realities of the pandemic and remote work. As staff have become more comfortable with the realities of the pandemic and remote work, there is less

demand for sessions related to this transition. Staff have also begun developing their own remote networks, both informally and related to their job functions.

Technological barriers are another challenge. Some staff members have poor or nonexistent, internet service at home and other staff do not have the correct devices to work remotely. We were able to provide devices for these staff members, although it took some time to ensure that all employees were equipped as necessary. While the WSU has offered Microsoft Office 365 for several years, which includes the communication platform Teams, it was not fully embraced as a productivity tool within the Libraries. There was a learning curve for many of our staff in fully understanding and utilizing this tool. An added complication was that the WSU began offering Zoom several months into the pandemic. While there are benefits to having several tools to choose from based on need, this created an additional learning requirement for staff who were unfamiliar with this new software.

Based on the continued attendance and positive feedback we have received from our OD efforts during the pandemic, we believe our transition to remote sessions and the associated rapid redesign of our efforts were successful. We have decided to make the virtual conference an annual event; planning for 2021 has already begun. The success of our "Managing Our Work During COVID-19" sessions has led to the creation of several other online events, ranging from social gatherings, such as a lunchtime dance party with a soul DJ and a social event where the crafters and artists on staff shared their recent works, to well-being sessions targeting remote work and the isolation and stress of living and working through a pandemic.

References

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