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**IMPROVE MORALE AND REDUCE STRESS
COMMUNICATE!**

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How do you maintain employee morale in a time of decreasing budgets and increasing demands? Communicate! Awareness of the larger picture can reduce those unpleasant surprises that erode morale. Additionally, time spent building strong relationships with your users pays dividends in the long run. The ever changing nature of our industry can translate into high stress levels but also affords high opportunity levels. Help your staff see the cup as half full and do it with a sense of humor. This paper discusses some strategies that have helped my departments through times of 0% raises, personnel shortages and projects gone awry.

As managers in higher education, we all face similar issues; tight budgets, the move towards accountability, overworked and understaffed departments, and the “brain drain” of technical personnel to the higher paying private sector. Since money often is not a feasible inducement to enter, or even more so to stay, in the higher education technology market, something else must take its place. Determining what that “else” is for your staff members can’t be done unless good working relationships are developed and that development won’t happen unless you start talking.

Communication is the key to helping your staff feel good about themselves and their jobs. I have found that an improvement in morale and a reduction in the stress level of my staff naturally follow when communication is used effectively.

This paper will cover six points that I try to keep in mind when working with my colleagues, whether they are my staff, the general University user community or upper management. Before we get into those points, however, I would like to briefly espouse my interpretation of the role of a manager or supervisor.

We have our formal job descriptions (and in many cases, our informal job descriptions that more accurately reflect what we actually do) but no matter how detailed or general, long or short, grandiose or simple these descriptions are, those of us who manage people really have the same job description: To help our staffs do their jobs and to make our bosses look good. I have found that if you do the former, the latter will follow.

We can accomplish this by acting as a conduit for information sharing, as well as by determining how our employees define job satisfaction and working with them to assure their positions meet that definition.

Point #1 - Keep Everyone Talking

Share news as you hear it. Pass on anything you hear from upper management levels (only things you are free to discuss, of course). This gives everyone a view of the big picture, how they fit into that picture and the importance of their contribution. Showing people how their jobs tie into the institutional and system goals and how their performance has a ripple effect throughout the organization fosters a sense of belonging to the whole and helps dissipate the sense of isolation. This isolation is quite often felt by technologists who work mostly in the “back room” and have more interaction with equipment than with human beings.

If you read or hear anything of interest whether it is about technology, higher education or local news, pass it on. We constantly pass around magazine articles or post snippets from electronic publications on our departmental listserv. If we find something we feel will be of interest to people in other departments, such as the librarians or one of the vice presidents, we’ll pass it on to them as well.

Building relationships with your users is very important. I am sure you can name a few user areas that need some extra attention and bridge mending. Concentrate on those. However, sometimes problem areas are not as evident. We were fortunate in that our department recently performed its first five year self-study. One of the issues that came through loud and clear was a perceived lack of communication with the faculty, and some of our strongest critics were lab supervisors or coordinators. To help rectify the situation we implemented lab coordinator meetings to share information. Some items we have discussed at those meetings are; the implementation of our new automated student CNet account project and how it affects the labs, the installation of a shared server to house standard software to give the students a common look and feel across the University, lab security, web page development and various problems experienced by the labs. We also try to involve the faculty in all university wide committees that we chair.

Get your staff known outside of the department. This can be a problem with technical people. Some are caught in the computer room never to see the light of day. Although many claim to prefer it that way, are you doing them and the department a disservice by allowing it to continue? Perhaps you should try to gently coax them out of there. Have your staff write memos under their own names. General announcements to the University community concerning interruptions in service; new services; or changes in services can be sent out under their names, not under yours or a generic name, like Computer Center, Operator or System Manager.

There are many vehicles that can be used to keep everyone talking and to enhance communication. A number we have used are staff and user meetings, brown bag lunches, listservs, e-mail, committee memberships, and good old fashioned socializing.

As I said earlier, building relationships with your users is very important. We have found *user meetings* to be an excellent way of doing this. Users are unfamiliar with technology and how it can simplify their jobs and help them become more efficient. They don't even know they should be asking questions, let alone what questions to ask. As technologists, we know the capabilities of the technology but don't know enough about everyone else's function in the University to determine how technology can help them. This merging of the minds is what the user meetings accomplish. Once we have a better understanding of each other's jobs, we can work together to make better use of the technology.

Our user meetings run weekly, bi-monthly, every other week, or monthly as decided by the departments. We discuss everything from report requests and hardware upgrades, to short term and long term goals and the introduction of new technologies such as web and intranet capabilities and client/server data marts. We've had some rough relationships with a few of the administrative departments, not an unusual situation in our industry. However, these situations have improved tremendously now that we all better understand the issues that the others face.

We also have a number of weekly *internal staff meetings* for various areas within the department as well as bi-monthly full staff meetings. These are used to discuss the status of various projects so everyone is aware of what is happening within the department and how it may affect them personally. These meetings are also used as brainstorming sessions, gripe sessions and mini-training sessions. For example, the department developed its mission statement, goals and objectives and identified its strengths and weaknesses at the full staff meetings. We also have had training sessions, conducted by knowledgeable staff members, covering the use of Schedule+; changes in our Usenet configuration; and modifications to our virus protection download procedures.

There is no doubt that all of these meetings take time, and the last thing you think you have as an overworked, understaffed technical department is time. Well, we felt the same way and even went so far as to identify meetings as both a strength and a weakness of the department. However, the goodwill that is developed and the sharing of knowledge, both within the department and with the user base, eliminates a lot of the wasted time and effort that results from misunderstandings and projects gone awry. This just uses the time in a more constructive manner, up front to avoid problems rather than after the fact cleaning up the mess.

The existence and scheduling of the meetings is determined by the user group. Whenever I hear rumblings that the meeting schedule has become overly burdensome I open the floor for suggestions. Groups have changed the time of their meetings to better fit into schedules, but we have yet to reduce the number of any of our standard meetings. Although we all go through periods of heavy workloads, everyone recognizes that they still derive benefit from the meetings and don't want to stop them.

Another communication vehicle we use is monthly *brown bag lunches*. We instituted these last spring and they have become very popular. These are open to the full University community and we invite everyone to request topics and to host sessions. We started hosting these in our student complex because it is more central to the campus than the computer center, and we felt the convenience would help attendance. However, after moving some sessions to the computer center because of scheduling difficulties, we found many people never knew where we were located or had never been to the computer center. We felt this additional level of familiarity with the center is important and now schedule some of the brown bag lunches in the computer center's conference room. Topics have included a progress report on the project to install CNet, the University wide network; how to perform searches on the web; how to use Schedule+; and tips for creating an effective newsletter.

Listservs have worked very well to improve communication and the use of this software has exploded across the University. Professors create them for their classes; various committees have developed them to facilitate communication between meetings; a listserv has been created for each of the users' groups with which we meet; and a University wide list is available for use by anybody to announce events, furniture availability, system downtime, etc.

E-mail is used heavily on our campus. I have heard complaints that it is cold and impersonal, but I think it is the best thing since sliced white bread. It is a tremendous time saver. Time is not wasted in trying to remember to call someone or by playing telephone tag, and the message is automatically documented. It can be saved and retrieved as a reminder at any time and takes less time than a formal memo. I have a difficult time finding the down side to e-mail.

Committees are another communication vehicle. As we all know, if nothing else, educational institutions have a multitude of committees to join. Encourage staff members to join University wide committees to get to know individuals they don't normally meet in the course of their day and to learn of other perspectives on campus. This, again, is another time consumer but can be well worth the time spent if it is not over used.

Old fashioned *socializing* is the final communication vehicle I'll discuss. Of course, you can't make people get together after office hours, but you can help develop a working environment where people enjoy each other's company enough to want to spend some time together. For example, members of my staff get together once after each semester to celebrate (or perhaps to commiserate on) the passing of another semester. A number of us also volunteer for various activities, such as the local cancer walk/run which was organized by a fellow staff member. If your campus is in a small town or rural area, chances are that your staff knows many other employees through their children, church and other organizations. All of this helps build better relationships that improve the morale and stress levels within your department.

Point #2 - Let your staff solve the problems

Why did you (or your predecessors) hire the people that work for you? Wasn't it because they had the expertise to do the job, or at least were capable of learning how to do the job? Many of us still struggle with the "I am the head of the department, I should know all of the answers and how to do everyone's job" syndrome. This is just not feasible in today's environment. No one can know it all and there is no shame in admitting you don't know the answer and that you have to check back with the experts in your department.

If you try to solve all problems and resolve all issues, at the very least you will become a bottleneck. Even worse, you will undermine the self-esteem of your staff and the confidence the users have placed in them. Your role is to help when asked and to give general direction when necessary. The users and your staff members are closest to the issue and they will come up with the best answer. You may have to direct that answer differently because of a political issue they are unaware of, but it will essentially remain their answer.

Once the work is completed, *always give credit to those who deserve it*. If you are praised for work performed by a staff member, make sure the individual understands who

actually did the work; and equally as important, pass on the compliment to your staff member.

Point #3 - Invest in your staff

Invest both time and effort in your staff members. Human nature and office politics will always create problems, be there to listen and try to diffuse the situation. Always strive to have everyone leave feeling they've gained something, even if it was just an ear to hear them out.

Ask questions, find out what their goals are. It's a little like asking, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" Help define their goals, if necessary, and work to align them with the departmental and institutional goals. Then invest the time and effort to help your staff attain those goals. People work better when they are doing something they are interested in and that they like.

Take the time to *jointly define departmental goals*. As I said earlier, our five year self-study really helped us in this respect. We put forth the effort to identify our mission and goals and, even more importantly, our strengths and weaknesses. We then went to work on our weaknesses as a team and we continue to do so.

Realize that not everyone will be happy with your department's services. When the criticism comes, *back up your staff in front of others*. If there is a real problem, resolve it privately with your staff. I have found that most problems are due to a lack of communication resulting in a misunderstanding or a bad working relationship.

Everyone has limitations, recognize them and work within them. This is very difficult because there is a fine line between holding people back and letting them work within their limitations. Push a little and see how they handle it. Talk with them, find out how you can help, determine their attitude. If it still doesn't work, you've probably hit a limitation. A more difficult situation is when someone stretches beyond their capabilities and doesn't recognize that it is not working. Trying to resolve that situation without disillusioning them can be a delicate matter.

Invest not only time and effort, but money. In our industry, *training is critical and well worth the time and money* (I include conference attendance as well as structured courses in the term, training). Not only does it provide skills and tool sets to do the job, it improves morale and self-esteem. (After all, aren't you happy that you're attending CAUSE?) It shows people that they are valued by the organization. Most universities have travel and training in the same budget line, and of course, that is the line that gets cut first when the collective belt has to be tightened. Short of being mandated to cut all training, put as much money in your training budget as possible, take it out of supplies if necessary. We all have what I call Christmas in June or July or whenever the end of the fiscal year falls. Have a leaner Christmas and spend the money throughout the year on training. Two years ago I had a budget of \$5,000 for training and travel for nineteen

employees. Last year I increased it to \$10,000 and this year I increased it to \$20,000 and we set a departmental goal to get everyone to at least one training session or conference this year.

Training does not have to be very expensive. We also have a library of training videos and CDs for various software products and operating systems. These combined with a VCR/TV, a PC, and a training schedule can create a cost effective training “corner.” We are now setting up a CD-ROM tower on a server to make these available to a larger audience.

Point #4 - Employees are people too

Your employees are your colleagues and must be treated with respect. Similar to Robert Fulghum’s book where he says everything he needed to know he learned in kindergarten, my version is “Do what your mother told you.” She taught us to say please and thank you. This holds true when speaking to employees as well as others. Some feel this is not necessary because managers give commands not make requests. That is not the case.

Own up to mistakes and apologize. At the same time, *be tolerant of mistakes in others.* These are not signs of weakness, but a recognition of the fact that we are all human and we all make mistakes. A situation can become much worse if your staff hides their mistakes from you out of fear.

Recognize that your *employees have personal lives* outside of the office. Be flexible. Allow staff members to occasionally leave a little early or take a long lunch for personal reasons. Work out arrangements for compensation time or personal leave if a significant amount of time is needed. Be careful about being a clock watcher or you will get a clock watcher in return. It has been my experience, that most of my employees have put in much more overtime than they ever take in compensation time. Of course, chronic abuse must be addressed.

Point #5 - Don’t sweat the small stuff

You must *reduce your own stress level* because you set the tone for the department. If you are stressed out, it will be reflected in your department. When you are uptight and ready for combat, the general stress level in your department will skyrocket and the morale will plummet. Don’t fall into the trap of “conditioned responses.” Think about what is really important and what is not. Remember, everyone will do something that annoys you. Concentrate on the good parts and the annoyances won’t seem so bad.

The following are a few examples of potential stress builders that really are “small stuff.”

Chronic lateness. If employees are often five to ten minutes late for work, think before you get annoyed. We have been conditioned to abhor tardiness and exalt timeliness since our first day in kindergarten. In primary school we were sent to the principal's office if we got into the classroom after the bell rang, even if we were only seconds late. Instead of falling into a conditioned response ask yourself some questions. What time do they usually leave at the end of the day? Do they usually work through lunch? Are they on call after hours? Do they come in on weekends whenever they are needed? Without being asked? Is there a legitimate reason such as child care or other problems at home? If you don't think first, you could end up with a worse situation.

Staff meetings that start late were my pet peeve. It seems that there is an unwritten law in academia that 1:00 really means 1:10, or 2:30 really means 2:40. I used to get annoyed and have made remarks in the past about showing up on time. However, on investigating further I found people were usually late because they were helping a user or in the middle of an operation that could not be interrupted until it was completed. Occasionally, someone forgot about the meeting but that wasn't usually the case. Now, instead of getting annoyed I spend the time visiting and kidding around with the rest of the staff. Rather than feeling that the time is wasted, I am using it to reinforce a good relationship with my staff.

Personal phone calls are another area that can be artificially inflated into an issue, wasting time, energy and good will. At the very least personal phone calls are frowned upon as a time waster. When we were teenagers our parents limited the time we could speak on the phone. Protests that we were actually doing homework, and therefore something worthwhile, were met with skepticism. Isn't this still the case with our children today? Of course, if the use of the phone for personal business is abused, it must be addressed. However, you have to determine what constitutes abuse versus a conditioned response.

Overwork is a stress builder we all fall heir to. *Learn how to organize*, make lists so you don't have to keep trying to remember things (you know something will be forgotten). Also, it is very satisfying to check things off a list. Just remember, as Richard Carlson, author of Don't Sweat the Small Stuff, reminds us, when you die your in-basket will not be empty. In other words, don't create stress by struggling to complete your list because as you are checking things off, you will always be adding new items.

Another stress buster to keep in mind is *flexibility*. In our field this is very important. How often have you placed an order only to learn that the item is obsolete and you have take a new model with slightly different functionality (and not always with backwards compatibility)? Learn to expect and even welcome change because there is no avoiding it.

Of course in many instances (I might venture to say most instances) stress comes from outside of your department. Working with users, especially non-technical, higher

level management, can create some extremely stressful situations both short term and long term. How you handle these situations will impact the morale of your department.

Be conscious of your reactions. You can't change other people or what just happened but you can change your reaction to it. When you find yourself under stress and ready to explode, go for a walk across campus. Visit someone unrelated to the stress. Walking and exercise naturally lighten your mood and visiting not only gets your mind off of the problem, but makes you more visible across campus and gives you an opportunity to build stronger relationships with others. If a walk won't do it for you, close your door and take the time to compose yourself. It is better to be out of touch for awhile than to lash out at someone and say or do something you regret.

Two questions I try to ask myself to put things in perspective:

Will this matter in five years?
Is this worth getting sick over?

Usually, how a particular situation is resolved won't matter in five years and it is never worth getting sick over. However, if you find you are getting sick and you don't see a workable solution, it may be time to move on.

Point #6 - Just smile

As managers of customer service departments we will always be facing stressful situations. That is why it is so important to *maintain a sense of humor*. Remember, you set the tone for your department. Learn to laugh at yourself. I am the butt of jokes in my department about both my height and my memory, basically because I started it by acknowledging and joking about my obvious lack of both.

Be aware of your facial expressions. You don't always know what impression you are giving others. Make it a rule to smile at everyone who enters your office. If it's one of your staff members coming in with bad news it puts them at ease (after all you don't want them hiding that bad news from you). If it's anyone else with bad news it gives you a slight edge to handle it because your mood automatically lightens when you smile. If someone has come in with good news or just to talk, you've set a light tone. Better yet, *make it a habit to smile at everyone.*

Always *look for the humor* in things and encourage your staff to do the same. Even when you are fuming and ranting you can always find something to laugh about. Make it a goal to laugh at least once in all meetings you have control over and even those you don't have control over, if appropriate. Even if you have to make it at your own expense, it will do wonders to lighten a tense meeting.

Audience participation

I have shared my philosophy on employee morale and given examples of steps my departments and I have taken to improve our work environment. However, I don't profess to have all of the answers, and I know there are many more great ideas out there. If the truth be known, my ulterior motive for this presentation was to ensure that I got the opportunity to pick the brains of the audience for some more ideas. Please bring examples of what you've done back at your shops and share them with the rest of us. If you think of something after the conference or want to discuss any of the points I've made here, my e-mail address is kdemauro@clarion.edu.