

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

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AS a dean who recently decided to resign after eight years and return to full-time teaching, I have many thoughts and reflections about “deaning.” My principal observation is that I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to serve as dean and welcomed the range of challenges presented by the position. To be sure, there were days when I should have remained in bed, but fortunately those were very few in number. Overall, the deanship was a wonderful learning experience in which I gained insights about people, institutions, and myself.

For purposes of this essay, however, I have not expanded on this general observation. Rather, I elected to write about a topic that did not receive attention in the Toledo Law Review’s previous collections of articles by deans. The two previous issues included more than 70 articles. Interestingly, while a few mentioned the staff, none examined the important role of staff in the life of a law school or discussed techniques for staff development. In some respects, this is not surprising but rather may be indicative of a problem. We take staff for granted.

I confess that as a faculty member I did not spend much time thinking about the role of the 60 staff members at the College of Law. Students appeared in my classes, usually with books and reproduced material. The classrooms were clean and had state-of-the-art equipment, including operating teaching stations (with a computer, audio-visual equipment and document camera). The Library had the requisite research material or obtained copies as needed. The Academic Support Program provided assistance to my students who were at risk or had disabilities. My office had appropriate furniture and technology, and was cleaned periodically. Guest speakers regularly visited the College and made presentations that were followed by elaborate receptions or luncheons. Reports were made at faculty meetings about the amount of money that alumni provided for financial aid. Students spoke excitedly about their summer and permanent job opportunities. All these things—and much more—just seemed to happen, while I devoted my time to teaching, writing, and occasional committee work.

As dean, I quickly discovered that we would not open for business without the dedicated efforts of the staff. Indeed, on a daily basis I was reminded of the critical role played by the hard working, but often underpaid, staff members. Early in my tenure, I determined that it was essential to the success of the College that staff members feel valued and that they understand their contributions to the overall operations. I, therefore, devoted considerable energy and time to implementation of formal and informal activities designed to recognize and empower the staff.

At the outset, I created a Law School Quality Improvement Team (LSQIT) comprised of five members elected by the staff. LSQIT was an outgrowth of a more general, University-wide initiative. Based on the then somewhat popular Total Quality Management (TQM) model used in business, the University program had

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many components designed to improve quality in the delivery of services. While the University program was a bit too bureaucratic for my taste, it did require the University community to undertake activities to include the staff in our thinking of University functions. Syracuse University Chancellor Kenneth Shaw deserves credit for delivering a clear message: staff members were no longer to be taken for granted but were to be recognized along with faculty and students as an integral part of the University.

I met on a monthly basis with members of LSQIT to discuss ways in which we could improve processes within the College as well as between the College and University. The LSQIT members discussed their own ideas and surveyed other staff members, soliciting information about work-related concerns and suggestions about ways to improve communication across departments. The topics included issues relating to such matters as the delivery of mail to the College's various administrative offices, training on new computing programs, facility maintenance, and parking. During our building construction project, the LSQIT served as an important vehicle for obtaining staff input. While most of the issues considered by LSQIT concerned processes within the College, some focused on matters relating to interaction with other units on campus.

Independent of these process issues, LSQIT determined that the staff could be involved in community service, and it organized a number of public service projects for staff participation. At Thanksgiving, the staff collected food and delivered food baskets to needy families in a nearby neighborhood. During the December holiday season, they collected gifts that were distributed to children in local schools. In the spring semester, they donated school supplies for a public elementary school.

As a second component of the staff development program, I instituted monthly breakfast meetings with the entire staff of the College. These meetings served three purposes. First, they created an opportunity for personal interaction among staff members from the different offices. For most of the workweek, staff members are limited to their respective offices and find little time to intermingle with those in other administrative areas. The monthly meetings provided opportunities for formal and informal interaction among the staff members in the various offices, thereby enabling them to become better acquainted with each other. A second and related purpose was to allow representatives from each office to report on current activities within their areas. In this way, staff not only learned about the work of the other administrative offices but also developed a sense of how their own work fit within the larger efforts of the College. Finally, the monthly staff meetings gave me an opportunity to report directly on current developments at the school.

I also initiated a monthly staff lunch as another opportunity for staff members to meet with staff from other parts of the building. The lunches were for staff only (I did not attend) and were informal without any business agenda. On some occasions, the LSQIT invited guest speakers who spoke on topics ranging from coping with stress to buying wine (hopefully, not meant as related topics). For the most part, however, the lunches were used solely for social purposes.

One of the challenges was to find ways to integrate the staff not only with each other but also with the faculty. To accomplish this goal, I invited staff members and guests to attend significant College of Law events (such as the annual alumni dinner, the dedication of our new building, the centennial anniversary dinner, the

holiday party, and guest speaker presentations). In the past, only faculty members and a few very senior staff were invited to such occasions. I expanded the invitation to include all staff members and, to encourage their attendance, invited them as guests of the school. These special events provided opportunities for staff and faculty to interact and for staff members to feel like welcome members of the community.

Another component of my program involved monthly meetings with the Administrative Cabinet comprised of the senior staff who reported directly to me. I used these meetings for a variety of purposes, including the building of a team approach to the many issues confronting the school. These monthly meetings also provided a valuable opportunity to create a supportive environment in which the senior staff could openly and honestly disagree with me or seek reconsideration of issues without fear of damaging our working relationship.

In addition to the Administrative Cabinet meeting, I held separate monthly meetings with the directors and assistant directors of the administrative offices. Like most law schools, we have Offices of Career Services, Student Affairs, Admissions and Financial Aid, Computing Services, and Alumni Relations. Each of these offices reported to an Associate Dean who, in the hierarchical structure, reported to me. The monthly meetings with the directors of the individual offices allowed us to move beyond the hierarchy. At these meetings, we discussed current as well as future projects. The Associate Deans, of course, could have provided much of this information directly to me. The meetings with the directors, however, allowed me to develop relationships with these other staff members, acquire a better understanding of the issues, and convey—both directly and indirectly—my appreciation for their efforts.

Early in my tenure as dean, I recognized that staff might benefit from the opportunity to create flexible work schedules. I encouraged directors to authorize flextime where appropriate to accommodate staff members who desired to take courses at the University or who had child care or other family care demands. In a few offices, flextime was not possible because of the limited number of employees. In most offices, however, we were able to develop a plan that accommodated the employees and insured timely completion of the work. Relatively few staff members took advantage of the flextime option, but all appreciated the fact that it was available.

As another component of the program to include the staff, I wanted to initiate a formal way of recognizing individual staff members for extraordinary contributions. I discussed this proposal with the LSQIT members but they opposed the idea. They maintained that such “employee of the month” awards have the potential for creating unnecessary jealousies and competition. They suggested instead that we develop a recognition program that would be inclusive of all staff members. As a result, we joined the University-wide program of recognizing individual staff for years of service. Once a year we publicly recognized those staff members who were celebrating a five-year anniversary of employment, and presented individual employees with a gift provided by the University.

I also tried to exhibit my respect and concern for the staff through the simple but effective practice of what I will call “walking around.” Like all deans, I received a large volume of mail that needed to be distributed to other offices. Rather than

asking my assistant to distribute the material, I personally delivered it. This provided opportunities to talk informally with staff, sharing stories about families and upcoming events outside the work environment.

I also invited staff to take advantage of my "open door" policy that was available to students and faculty. Often, staff members would stop by to provide an update on a child's success in a sport, involvement in a school play, or college plans. On other occasions, we traded information about books or recent films. In a few instances, a staff member met with me to complain about a supervisor. Such meetings were sometimes problematic because the staff member did not want me to mention the complaint to the supervisor. Without hearing both sides, I was not in a position to make any judgments about the complaint. In these instances, however, the staff member was not seeking action on my part, but rather seemed to be looking for encouragement to address the issue directly with the supervisor.

Finally, in my years as dean, I tried to address the low pay and salary inequities that existed among the staff members. For this purpose, I was able to use funds in addition to the annual budget increments provided by the University and thus was able to provide average increases that were greater than the annual incremental amounts. The supervisors and I worked together to develop and implement an annual evaluation system that included merit-based salary increases.

The staff development measures described in this essay are not complex, but they do require considered planning and considerable time. I maintain that the measures are worth the effort. Staff members feel valued and, as a result, are more committed to their individual jobs as well as the overall law school enterprise. In addition, I found that the staff development program was personally rewarding. As many have suggested, one of the dean's roles is that of an enabler, creating an environment in which others can maximize their potential. Through these measures, I was able to perform that role for the staff.

I should note that when I closed my office door for the last time, I had a range of emotions. Interestingly, a sense of sadness was predominant, caused in part by the recognition that I no longer would be working on a daily basis with this dedicated group of wonderful individuals. As I headed toward my new office, a staff member stopped me in the hall and shook my hand. He thanked me for my efforts on behalf of the staff and observed that these efforts would have lasting impact. I continued down the hall, hoping that he was correct and aware that my sadness was making room for a sense of satisfaction.