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Seminar goes ponder values-based leadership

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News and Information

What can the average UW employee do to ensure that the UW lives its values in the work place?

A daylong seminar last week, attended by close to 100 staff and faculty, used a combination of case studies and events involving major historical figures to explore how individual decision-making helps create -- or undermine -- an organization's stated core values.

Professional & Organizational Development invited three members of the Board of Regents -- Sally Jewell, Herb Simon and Stan Barer -- to serve as respondents in discussions of the case studies. The point of the studies was to analyze a situation that could have occurred at a university and develop a solution that emphasized institutional values.

As part of the process of developing a vision for the UW, Provost Wise proposed that the UW emphasize six core values: respect, diversity, collaboration, innovation, excellence and integrity. The case studies probed the role that these values could play in confronting difficult situations.

For example, in one situation you, the project manager, have a boss who is creative and energetic but not organized. While the boss is away on vacation, your boss's boss calls you and asks for an update about a project you've never heard about, but one on which, he's been informed, you are making "tremendous progress." What do you tell your boss's boss?

In discussions, it became clear that core values may not necessarily operate in complete harmony. Does integrity dictate, in this instance, that you must tell your boss's boss the whole truth -- probably jeopardizing your boss's job and perhaps your own? Does collaboration suggest you should make allowances for your boss's style of organization and not tell the whole truth in your response? And what kind of actions would exemplify respect, when your boss, by leaving you in the lurch, has perhaps disrespected you?

"This kind of case is very real," Jewell said. "You could have a boss that was great at securing research money but never worried about any of the details involved. He can get away with what I regard as bad behavior because he's successful. This is clearly not a black-and-white situation, especially when your own job could be at stake."

"This case study shows how leaders have great impact, but they often will make decisions based on very little direct knowledge," Barer said. "That's a risk of leadership. So what do you

owe to your boss, and to your boss's boss? What do they owe to you?"

"If I found myself in this environment, where this was happening repeatedly, I would ask myself whether I can continue to work there," said Simon. "What kinds of values are these individuals demonstrating by their actions?"

In another case study, a dean's management style leads to friction with senior faculty, who eventually force his resignation. On the plus side, the dean was excellent at recruiting new faculty and initiating new programs; he also managed to secure major private donations. But he appeared to have little talent for or interest in day-to-day management of the school and did a poor job of selling his vision to the faculty. You are called in as a consultant one day before the dean submits his resignation. What approach would you take? Which core values would be upheld in your response to the resignation?

Discussants pointed out that it was clear communication had broken down between the dean and the faculty and that it was unlikely to be rebuilt in time to prevent the dean's resignation. Collaboration was no longer possible. So, in moving beyond the resignation, it was important to restore an environment of transparent decision-making so that the other core values could be exercised.

Jewell took a somewhat different view. "It's very difficult to find great deans," she said. "Was he positioned for success with his faculty? Did he talk with them? It's my view that there is too much turnover in higher education. This dean was on a mission to raise the stature of the school but the necessary communication with his team, especially faculty, was not happening. He may have unwittingly supported an undercurrent that prevented him from being successful. Maybe this is a teachable moment and the situation can be salvaged."

"Who is in charge?" asked Barer. "If you have to ask who is in charge you've already lost. How should the dean and faculty be working together? He was a change agent who didn't share his ideas with the faculty, which probably would have taken away their fear. There's a risk that his resignation will be seen as a 'victory' by faculty who can end up impairing a search for his successor."

"These case studies show that it's all about communication," said Terry Macaluso, the presenter for the day's seminar. "Our case studies are somewhat artificial in stressing one or more core values, when in reality we will act and make decisions out of all of them. But discussing individual cases and articulating the principles involved will serve well at a future moment."

"This is a good environment in which to start discussions among faculty and staff to spell out what the words in the core values actually mean," said Simon. "If the values aren't utilized then the exercise of articulating the values was meaningless. They need to be put into practice. People need to assess themselves and decide what kind of institution they want to work in."

"We need to talk about the core values used by decision-makers," Barer said. "These values are real; we need to try and implement them in a daily context. This is all about communication from above and below."

"For me the richest aspect of the event was the discussion at the tables and with the whole group," said Heidi Lang, special programs manager for Professional & Organizational Development. "People so rarely get to step out of the day-to-day craziness of the workplace and talk about the bigger picture and their place in it. We ended the day on a very practical note and developed action plans addressing our role in creating the culture we want here at

the UW."

"Every organization makes its culture every day," Macaluso said. "Everyone has a leadership role through their impact on others. The pattern of shared basic assumptions that constitute a culture has been tested through experience, and it's what we teach to new members of our group. Every decision and action contributes to the maintenance of a certain culture in the work place. The challenge is, How do we make a culture that has adopted our stated values as its assumptions?"

Professional & Organizational Development's Leadership Seminar Series will continue this spring with a seminar on accountability.

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