

Organizational Development, Best Practices, and Employee Development

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This article describes a unique, ongoing collaborative project between the University of Kansas Libraries (KUL) and the department of human resources at the University of Kansas (KU). The goal of the project is to apply best practices techniques in addressing the needs of the campus-wide employee development program. The authors constitute the team that implemented this project.

On many campuses, the library is ahead of most other departments in supporting staff development activities and in utilizing professional development programs offered by the campus human resources (HR) department. The library is frequently the only department (other than HR) with a staff development or training position, and often has its own staff development committee. It is clear that most university libraries place a high value on the continuing development of the professional and personal skills of their staff. Library leaders, managers, and staff consciously seek new ideas for improving their organization's staff development programs.

In addition, current fiscal constraints are, once again, driving organizations to seek innovative collaborative ventures between departments and units, optimizing wherever possible the use of limited resources for broader benefits to the organization as a whole. It is hoped that the KU experience described in this article may facilitate the use of best practices techniques in other institutions, lead to other collaborative projects at other institutions, and serve as a model activity that benefits the library, HR, and the campus as a whole.

The KU best practices in employee development project was planned in fall 2000 and began in January 2001. At that time, a library faculty member (the senior author) with a background in employee development and organizational development took up residence in KU's professional development section of HR. The project, originally planned for eighteen months, focused on this question: What can be achieved by, and what are the practicalities of, a collaborative best practices effort designed to improve the campus-wide professional development program for faculty and staff?

In the near term, the faculty member provided additional staffing, new perspectives, and supplemental skills and experience to a unit with a significant workload and limited resources. In the long term, it is hoped the project will enable the professional development staff to be even

more capable than they already are to develop, market, and provide excellent professional development and organizational development programs and services. As a consequence of this effort, the workshops and services offered to all KU faculty and staff will be even more supportive of the mission of the university.

This project has several unusual aspects, in that it:

- Is collaborative and synergistic. It involves sharing expertise across departmental borders toward a common goal.
- Is inside-out. The library faculty member in some ways serves a consultant role, but since he works day to day in a range of professional development activities within the HR department, the approach is quite different from the traditional consultant approach. The library faculty member participates fully as a member of the professional development section. He is involved in planning, designing, scheduling, and delivering training and orientation programs, as well as facilitation, team building, and other organizational development services to the KU community. As a result, he knows in detail the challenges of providing professional development programs on the Lawrence campus, can focus on those needs that are most urgent, and understands the interrelationships between various HR programs and services and those of other campus departments and units.
- Focuses on best practices, a tried-and-true approach to improving programs and services. In this case, best practices were researched in areas of most relevance to the needs of the professional development section.
- Augments current staffing and skills. The library faculty member brings both time and skills that supplement the existing skills resident in the professional development staff. The skills include experience in staff

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development, facilitation, Web-based information systems, planning, and bibliography.

- Has not been done before. A fairly extensive literature search, plus contacts with other universities, indicates that KU may be the first university to implement a collaborative best practices project such as this.

The Setting

KU is a major comprehensive research university. Its main campus is in Lawrence, with a medical center in Kansas City, the Edwards campus in Overland Park, and four other significant facilities in the state. The work described in this article took place on the Lawrence campus, which in fall 2002 had more than 4,000 full-time equivalent faculty and staff serving a population of more than 25,000 students.

At KU, employee development has high-level support. Shortly after Robert Hemenway was hired as chancellor in 1995, and even before he actually settled into the position, he sent a letter to KU faculty, staff, and students. The letter included his view of the ten characteristics of a great public university. Number seven was:

A great university recognizes the wisdom of investing in the human development of the work force, so that each employee is able to pursue personal and professional goals without institutional obstacles. A great university has no glass ceiling.¹

Within HR, the professional development section is charged with identifying and meeting the training and development needs of KU faculty and staff. The section normally has two full-time staff. The focus is on actions, programs, and services that help employees improve current skills while developing new skills useful in their current positions and careers. In addition, the section offers facilitation services, consulting, counseling, teambuilding, and other organizational development services. Other departments on campus, such as academic computing and the Watkins health center, also develop workshops for faculty and staff, and their programs are often publicized along with professional development offerings. At KU, the terms employee development, staff development, and professional development are used interchangeably (although fine distinctions could be made).

KUL employs approximately 150 of the KU faculty and staff, and it has a strong staff development program of its own. In many cases KUL asks professional development section staff to tailor existing workshops to its needs. In some cases, KUL asks the professional development section to create special programs. And, in reverse fashion, KUL sometimes offers staff development opportunities and makes those programs available to other campus staff.

Organizational Development and Best Practices

Several authors, including Fitz-enz, have noted that the emerging dominant paradigm in leading and managing organizations is that presented by the concept of organizational development (also called organization development [OD]).² Within research libraries, the pervasiveness of the OD concept can be seen in the increasing number of libraries creating OD specialist positions. The most comprehensive and most cited definition of this concept is by French and Bell:

Organization development is a long-term effort, led and supported by top management, to improve an organization's visioning, empowerment, learning, and problem-solving processes, through an ongoing, collaborative management of organization culture—with special emphasis on the culture of intact work teams and other team configurations—using the consultant-facilitator role and the theory and technology of applied behavioral science, including action research.³

The authors then devote three pages to explaining the fine points of that definition, and later in the work include an entire chapter on action research that includes several definitions of this phase.⁴ In a nutshell, action research is an iterative process used in problem solving—a process that includes: defining the issue that needs attention; collecting information and researching the issue; clarifying options and gathering feedback on those options; planning action collaboratively; taking action; assessing results; providing feedback; and taking additional action as needed. Rothwell and Kazanas simplify the process.⁵ McNiff has authored a thorough work on the topic.⁶

It is very convenient that: (1) the KU professional development section teaches a problem-solving model that is very similar to the action research model; (2) the professional development staff are open to experimentation, willing to test new ideas and exercises in the classroom; and (3) the section already values assessment techniques and feedback from program participants (and potential participants).

The identification of best practices is a key component of both action research and benchmarking. The work by Bogan and English recounts the history of benchmarking, and, unlike some works, covers the use of benchmarking and best practices in the public sector.⁷ One of their statements captures the essence of this approach: "Best practices benchmarking can be described as the process of seeking out and studying the best internal and external practices that produce superior performance."⁸

Leibfried and McNair also clearly differentiate between benchmarking, a concept essential to the philosophy of continuous improvement, and the identification of best

practices as a key objective in continuous improvement.⁹ The authors go on to clarify: "The overriding objective of benchmarking is to identify best practice."¹⁰ Senge makes several references to best practices.¹¹ Knicely recommends that future top-notch HR leaders will have to "steal (and share) shamelessly," a reference to the philosophy of best practices.¹²

There are cautions, however, in using best practices and benchmarking. Hammer and Stanton, for example, warn that nonjudicious use of benchmarking can stifle creativity and lead an organization to be content with just being like other organizations.¹³ Fitz-enz summarizes both the positives of best practices and their limitations.¹⁴

Best Practices in Employee Development

Barbazette comes close to identifying best practices for training programs in general.¹⁵ She presents a comprehensive set of thirty-eight criteria that can be used to assess how progressive a training department or training program is. This set of criteria can be read as a list of best practices, and items listed include: training priorities; providing support for the department and its trainers; assessing training needs; improving the curriculum and training methods; marketing and publicizing programs and services; budgeting; and evaluating. Rapkins wrote a chapter titled "Best Practice for Continuing Professional Development" in Woodward's work highlighting British approaches to enhancing staff competencies.¹⁶ The American Society for Training and Development revises its handbook on training philosophy and practice every nine or ten years; while it is not best practices per se, it is an excellent reflection of current thinking and changing scenarios in training.¹⁷

Within libraries, the Staff Development Committee of LAMA's HR section keeps the library community aware of progress in staff development by periodically issuing a new edition of its guide.¹⁸ The Leadership Committee of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) recently identified the key components of library staff development programs. These include a coherent curriculum, a program coordinator, courses that target the specific needs of different staff, program assessment and evaluation, adequate resources, effective partnerships, and administrative commitment. The list of components on the Web includes links to sample documents relating to each component.¹⁹ ARL also periodically updates its Systems and Procedures Exchange Center (SPEC) publication on staff training and development.²⁰

Determining Best Practices

One of the interesting developments early in this project was a conscious decision to veer away from a theoretical

and academic project toward a very practical one. What was most needed was an approach for wrestling with pressing issues in the department and on campus, and, for those issues, seeking out information on what other institutions were doing, then evaluating that information to determine applications at KU.

The project team tried a variety of approaches and resources in order to determine the best practices on specific topics, such as "What new exercises could we use in KU's ethics workshops?" or "How could professional development staff better publicize their workshops?" Over time, several sources of information emerged as more useful than others in providing insights into what other institutions were doing in similar situations. The most useful sources became a checklist that team members could use when faced with a new issue. A review of the list would remind team members of available resources and help to identify those most likely to produce the information needed. The list consists of ten useful sources of information and can be called "The Best Practices in Employee Development Toolkit." The components of the toolkit are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Training Literature

Staff in KU's professional development section have ready access to several sources of training ideas and educational materials. The focus has been on a few standard training references. In addition to ones already mentioned, Eittington and Klatt have extensive manuals on the nuts and bolts of effective training.²¹ There are also several publications designed for trainers that cover a number of topics generally addressed in employee development programs, and, by their intent, copyright permission is granted to the purchaser to copy exercises and handouts for use in the classroom.²² As one thinks more broadly about learning research and its implications for employee development programs, works such as that by Quinones and Ehrenstein become important.²³ Their work summarizes research-based information that can be applied in employee development. Davis and Davis provide an interesting approach to matching learning strategies to learning needs.²⁴ In addition to monographs, members of professional development units need to keep abreast of periodical publications such as *T+D*, the journal of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD). Such sources have been particularly useful at KU in developing new workshops and enriching those currently in operation.

Other Literature

This can include monographs and journal literature on topics for which training is being provided, such as facilitation, project management, or diversity. At KU, the professional development staff rely heavily on such materials in preparing

presentations and in developing annotated bibliographies that are included in workshop manuals.

Associations

Memberships in associations related to the employee development function help ensure that staff are aware of trends and opportunities in the field, both for personal development and for keeping the curriculum and teaching methods up to date. Some of the training-related associations include: ASTD (which also has a Kansas City chapter near KU); the Kansas Trainers Network; the Association for Experiential Education; and the North American Simulation and Gaming Association. (The latter two associations are excellent for their focus on activities to use in training.) In addition, there are discussion groups within divisions of the American Library Association (ALA) that focus on issues pertinent to the employee development function. Two examples are the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Personnel Administrators and Staff Development Officers Discussion Group, and the LAMA Library Organization and Management Section Organizational Development Discussion Group.

Electronic Discussion Lists

Professional development staff at KU participate in several discussion lists that: (1) keep them aware of developments, conferences, and new information resources; and (2) provide opportunities to ask questions of other specialists or in other ways contribute to discussions on topics of interest. On several occasions, a first step in determining options on a particular issue is to send a note to the appropriate discussion list asking what other institutions are doing. Lists that are particularly useful include ones on training and development, group facilitation, faculty development, and library personnel and staff development practices.²⁵

Personal Networks

Each member of the professional development unit has a network of colleagues and contacts with which regular communication is maintained. Network members may be persons with whom staff interact regularly, or others with expertise useful to the development and implementation of programs and services. Early in an investigation of a topic, it is quite common to call or send an e-mail to one or more of those contacts asking their opinion.

Web Search Engines

A Web search engine, such as Google, can be very helpful. At KU, Google and other search engines are often used to identify other institutions teaching workshops similar to

those being developed at KU, to locate training materials, or to answer other types of questions.

Library Services

Since one member of the team is also a librarian, every effort is made to maximize the use of KU library services in support of employee development. Members of the team utilize the wide range of databases offered, frequently borrow materials on interlibrary loan, and have a set of current awareness profiles on the system that provide regular updates on new literature on specific topics as well as the tables of contents of select journal titles.

Training

Although training funds for professional development staff are limited, the team takes advantage of learning opportunities on campus, in the community or area, and at conferences. In addition to being a key component of personal and professional development, such events also stimulate thinking about the workshops being taught or developed.

Field Trips

Field trips to other institutions are frequently done for benchmarking, and some institutions devote significant time, effort, and expense to set up such visits. The benefits of actually being present where something special is going on cannot be underestimated. At KU, only limited use has been made of this tool, but it continues to be an option.

Peer Group for Comparison

It is customary for many universities to have a peer group of similar institutions that serve more or less as benchmarks. For KU, that peer group includes the Universities of Colorado, Iowa, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Oregon. For other purposes, KU may compare itself with public universities in the Big Twelve Athletics Conference or the Association of American Universities. Using both the normal comparison groups for KU, as well as additional information, it is possible to assemble a core group of institutions that can be polled (personally or via the Web) as a benchmark group on any issue the organization faces. This has not been done frequently at KU, but it is another potential tool to be used.

While the resources in this toolkit work well at KU, other institutions might find a different combination of tools more effective. The greatest value in using a toolkit of any kind for best practices work is that it provides both a structure and a memory aid to assist in completing step two of action research (collecting information and researching the issue). In many cases, the toolkit truly facilitates moving forward with a project. At KU, many administrators and staff are implementing the productivity principles advanced by David Allen, a noted author and trainer on such issues

Contributing to a Culture of Organizational Development at KU

As mentioned earlier, much of the work of professional development is based on OD. Many of the services the section offers are OD-based, such as facilitation and teambuilding. Consequently, a significant portion of KU's OD specialists work out of this section. Several other staff at least partially involved with OD are in KUL and the information technology departments, all part of the information services division. The vice-provost for information services has a strong interest in OD topics, and the use of OD in day-to-day operations and change management. As a result, the vice-provost has worked with two staff from professional development to create a community of practice for staff interested in OD. The group has been meeting approximately six times a year for three years. Fifteen staff, mostly from information services, participate in these meetings and have become a core group for facilitating meetings and helping to implement change in departments. The professional development section has an important role in keeping the group going, developing programs, and working with information service departments.

The formation of such a group was not a goal of the professional development section, but it quickly became clear that fostering this group was mutually beneficial to both information services and the professional development section. Via personal networks, the team has determined that KU is one of only a few institutions with an active OD group that cuts across several departments on campus.

Implementing New Experiential Exercises in Workshops

Experiential exercises are a cornerstone of training programs, and they range from role plays to case studies to right-brain artistic exercises done to stimulate creativity. Employee development specialists are always seeking ways to improve the exercises they use and to find new ones. As staff were reviewing the stress management workshop offered at KU, they discovered three converging concepts: (1) drumming and drum-circle activities have a remarkable and positive impact on stress levels; (2) drumming can be used for meditation, which is one of the stress management techniques many institutions teach; and (3) corporations have been using drumming activities for years for team and community building. Further, many trainers look for applications of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences in the classroom.²⁹ Evidence is mounting that teaching situations employing more of the eight intelligences proposed by Gardner so far are likely to be more successful with a larger number of program participants.³⁰

The bottom line at KU is that professional development has been experimenting with percussion-based experiential exercises in teambuilding, stress management, and creativity seminars, and occasionally uses such exercises to review principles taught in an eight-day supervisory training pro-

gram. In some cases, the exercises augment processes in existing workshops; in other cases, they form the core for new programs. The exercises used are based on the work of Arthur Hall, an ethnomusicologist who has pioneered simple facilitation techniques for use with percussion instruments in community building programs.³¹ At this point, KU seems to be one of the early adopters of this type of exercise in higher education. The potential for the use of such exercises is only beginning to be investigated, both at KU and in the broader training and education community. This year's work by VanGundy and Naiman by its very focus on experiential exercises based on the arts, seems to indicate this is a growing movement.³²

Conclusions

Collaboration between library staff and HR professional development staff is both natural and productive. On many campuses, these two units are most interested in, and practiced in, employee development activities. Further, each unit brings special talents to the task at hand. This has proven true at KU. Because on many campuses the library is one of the larger departments and one of the heavier users of professional development programs, this is a nice and logical alliance.

At KU, the project team has consciously applied the philosophy of benchmarking, via the best practices approach or concept, in seeking to improve the campus-wide employee development program in specific areas. In so doing, the team has effectively utilized the action research model from OD. The most useful aspect of using best practices and action research is that it forces staff to seek solutions to problems and issues outside the immediate situation. The best practices/action research model provides a process that both codifies and simplifies this approach, while at the same time facilitating focused discovery.

Overall, the project team has made significant progress in some areas, but there is much more that could be done, given time and other resources. That is at least part of the reason the project has continued beyond the original eighteen-month period (though at a 20 percent level of effort by the library faculty member). This approach is, however, one way to work toward a culture of organizational development on campus. The approach can be applied systematically in other departments on campus, and on other campuses.

Acknowledgments

The authors appreciate the support of Marilu Goodyear, vice-provost for information services; Ola Faucher, director of human resources, and Stella Bentley, dean of libraries at KU. Without their support, this project could not have been conducted. The authors also thank other administrators, faculty, and staff who have supported and assisted in our work.

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