

Passing in Review (Continued)

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Abstract

Being a member of a review team is somewhat like being both a reporter and an editorial writer.

Passing in Review (Continued)

Thomas M. Byrd and Glen W. Goss

Tom: Being a member of a review team is somewhat like being both a reporter and an editorial writer.

The reviewer, like a reporter, first has an obligation to get the facts. He must read, listen, question and probe until he has a good understanding of the subject (department) being reviewed. This may take cramming. The advanced material supplied by the department is a tremendous help. It gives the reviewer a framework on which to hang information obtained in personal interviews.

But the reviewer cannot stop with just digging out a few facts. He, like an editorial writer, must make analyses, draw conclusions, and offer specific recommendations. His ultimate responsibility is to suggest a better way.

I was a member of the team that reviewed the Department of Agriculture Information at Purdue University in December 1979. I was surprised at how easy it was to establish rapport with the Purdue staff. From the beginning, staff members struck me as being open, honest, candid and constructive. They were genuinely interested in improving the department, which was the goal of the review team. Therefore, we were immediately united behind a common objective.

Last issue, Mason E. Miller (CSRS) described the onsite review process in communication. This issue, Tom Byrd (NC) and Glen Goss (PA) talk about reviews first from the viewpoint of a review team member, and then from the view of a communication staff that has been reviewed. First, Tom, then Glen.

Despite a diversity of backgrounds, review team members developed a surprisingly similar perception of the department. They agreed on strengths and weaknesses and had no difficulty arriving at key recommendations. This strengthened my faith in the merits of the review process.

This is not to say that review team members were completely objective. At best, we were loving critics. I found myself, inadvertently at times, speaking for the department in discussions with school administrators and clientele groups. Officially, I was an impartial observer. Professionally, I was one of them—an information specialist. I saw nothing wrong with trying to build a few bridges for my fellow workers while on campus.

Finally, serving on a review team is professionally stimulating. It is the best opportunity I know, short of working for another staff, to see one's own department in a new perspective. We read and hear of work that other states are doing. But to get a top-to-bottom look at the entire agricultural information program of another state is a rare privilege.

Equally beneficial is the interchange that goes on between members of the review team, often in late night sessions. We used these sessions to recap our observations of the day and to set specific objectives for the following day. Invariably these sessions drifted off into mind stretching discussion on what information departments could and should be doing.

In summary, say "yes" as quickly as possible if you're asked to serve on a review team.

Glen: The host institution's view on reviews might be summarized this way.

The payoff from a review depends on how much effort and thought you put into the review. We in Pennsylvania benefited greatly. Payoff came from staff input before, during, and after the review. We benefited from being an active and willing host throughout. Professional renewal comes when you take an honest and thorough look at yourself, your job, and your relationships with staff colleagues.

Any review team provides a mirror that gives you a broad perspective—as others see you. We found our vision from that mirror cloudy at times. But, that is a reflection of how we are understood—or misunderstood.

Our review encouraged talk, interest, and activity among our staff and our clients—department chairmen, scientists,

specialists—groups who often tend to take us for granted. Keep your eyes and ears open to take full advantage of exchanges the team has with such groups during the review, and in your own conversations and afterwards.

Marie Lavallard reports her experience at the Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station: “We found it very valuable to involve not only information people of the department and the campus but also heads of subject matter departments and representatives of off-campus research station directors. This gave them a chance to hear exactly what we were doing, and also to express needs they had that our staff might be serving. The advance planning for the review, and this interplay with other areas, were among the most productive parts of the experience.”

Two weeks after the Pennsylvania review, we held a half-day retreat. We shared experiences of the one week review, verbal statements from the reviewers, and preliminary suggestions from staff members. When the written reports arrived from the reviewers, they were circulated to all staff. Two committees—procedures and personnel—were organized from ag communications volunteers to develop suggestions for the unit director, based on the critique and recommendations.

Shortly after the onsite review, a regular university administrative review was conducted by a committee that included three of our communicators. Analyses from the 1979 onsite and 1980 Penn State University administrative reviews were used by the two agricultural communications committees.

Change has been continuous. Modifications had been made based on facts gathered before the onsite review. Many changes were adapted immediately after the onsite review, while our two committees were active. As director of agricultural communications, I followed up on major recommendations with Dean James M. Beattie and his associates.

Reorganization and staff turnover have provided some opportunities for redirection. More than 2 years after the onsite review, standing and ad hoc committees in agricultural communications continued to make use of the report to better tailor our program to the challenges our college faces in the 80's.

Taking a hard look at yourself through the eyes of outside experts clears the air. It gives support and credence to many things already seriously considered. In some cases, evaluations suggest an entirely new direction. Activities can be

dropped or farmed out so more significant things can be done.

Communicators should stress positive points in a review. At the same time, any review is also a critique that focuses on needed change and negative aspects of your program. Keep a positive attitude; changes offer promise of improving the situation.

At Penn State, we are stressing importance of teamwork and cooperation with increasing knowledge and recognition of what communications colleagues do. Spirited competition always will be part of getting things done, but the reinforcement of working together across media pays off.

Our efforts to take initiative on the basis of thorough analysis gives us a better chance to control our own destiny. The legitimizing power of the review helps us as we continue to define goals and priorities.

To me, reviews seem to be particularly needed today with technological and political changes so prevalent. Keeping pace in our field may not be easy, but it is imperative. Sitting back in any type of rut, no matter how comfortable, can mean that other information professionals on our campuses may take the spotlight. If we choose to work with other institutional experts in our field and fields closely related, we're likely to be on the communications team of the future.

Challenges are vast. Changes can be traumatic. The opportunities, however, are there. If you have someone from outside provide a mirror, you can take a better look at your operation. You'll have added credibility as you define goals, procedures and priorities for the future.