

The Communication Center as a Resource for Professional Development

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Many view university communication centers just to be hubs for peer tutoring that aid students in overcoming public speaking anxiety. Although that outlook is correct, a plethora of information can be gleaned from observing the workings of a communication center, especially in the realm of professional development and efficiency. Much like in any other business or operation, “understanding communication between coworkers and superiors is important because competent communication between these groups often results in better decision making and greater productivity” (Apker, Propp & Zabava, 2009). This is just one key aspect of professional development that contributes to the success and efficiency of companies. The same imperative qualities can be observed through consultants’ methods to assist speakers in times where they are unsure, consultant interactions, as well as other scenarios that may commonly occur in communication centers.

Laura Ashley Mills, a senior at UNC-Greensboro at the time, went through the process of conducting research at her university’s communication center. Mills stated:

I discovered a group of people enthusiastic about communication, helping others succeed, and creating a work environment that fosters community, innovation, and productivity. I found multiple resourceful themes of processes and occurrences within this specific

communication center regarding the communication between consultants, managing consultants, and the graduate student managers in relation to the inner workings of the center as a whole.

Mills discovered motifs that she found to be vital players in the success and longevity of the center, such as: collaboration, comfortability, structure, proper conflict management, and adaptability. She recognized that these characteristics had a positive influence on the consultants who worked at the center, which greatly impacted the caliber of guidance they would be able to give the speakers seeking help. Mills’ discoveries can serve as a reference and catalyst to discuss how communication centers are promoting the professional development of their employees and operations of their center.

Collaboration

Undoubtedly, collaboration, also called knowledge-sharing, is pertinent to group problem-solving especially. In the interviews Mills conducted with the consultants of the UNCG Speaking Center, the thread of valuing collaboration was evident. A communication consultant stated, “A lot of my learning has come from just talking to the other consultants. I have such a good relationship with the people that I work with.”

Tabrea LaGrone, a senior at UNCG, recalls her one semester of training and shadowing, and her two semesters of working as a communication consultant at

the center. LaGrone learned early on that the center provided an environment that prioritized the accurate assistance of all speakers. She noticed consultants weren't chastised for not knowing answers to all questions, but rather encouraged to ask their fellow consultants to ensure correct answers were given to speakers. This is an instance where collaboration was essential in maximizing the visit of the speakers.

Comfortability

Next, it was found the theme of comfortability positively impacted the flow of knowledge-sharing. When Mills asked the consultants about interactions with superiors or subordinates she received similar answers each time, such as: "we're all treated as equals" and "we all have pretty even relationships with [our superiors]." Each consultant positively emphasized that they felt they were treated equally and fairly. Furthermore, each interviewee told Mills that they start their day by greeting the desk manager in the front lobby area and greeting the consultants on duty in the back room. Actions such as these create heightened group cohesion, which translates to consultants feeling more comfortable in going to their fellow consultants to engage in knowledge-sharing.

Structure

In fact, Mills noticed the comfortability can lean a bit too far on the lenient side of the spectrum at times. One consultant candidly declared:

There's a lot of miscommunication, or lack thereof, between setting things up and getting them done in a timely manner...it's kind of like, 'When you get a chance, can you do this?' and then [consultants] get so wrapped up in just doing the consultations and just getting

through their shift, they kind of forget to do it.

Subsequently, when given too much flexibility, tasks can be neglected because structural boundaries, like a formal deadline, are not put in place and enforced. The comfortability aspect necessitates the implementation of policies and procedures to tip the scale back to one of balance. One way this is translated is through consultants not being allowed to use their phone while on their shift. Instead, during times when few consultations are scheduled consultants are instructed to work on assigned center projects or interact with their fellow consultants via group cohesion activities.

Conflict Management

In the rare event of conflict among the consultants in the center, an interviewee had this to say about conflict management: ...it is something we do in private typically. A lot of times when we pull someone aside you never know if it's something maybe that they did wrong or they just needed to talk...or share something.

The UNCG Speaking Center opts to keep these matters discreet while finding a resolution to the root of the problem through making proper adjustments. Also, the low instances of conflict can be credited to the previously mentioned themes, promoting an environment of harmony.

Adaptability

Lastly, there is adaptability. Mills heard conflicting opinions about this from consultants. Some acknowledged that the ability to make decisions in unpredictable moments is an ability that needs to be cultivated by consultants. A consultant disclosed this is an area that needs improvement within the center by stating, "...I've seen a lot of panic when something

goes wrong...they get baffled and they don't know how to move forward. They need to be able to trust themselves to make those decisions." The consultants in the UNCG Speaking Center are at varying stages of their professional development journeys and the center is a place where such skills can be nurtured and improved through opportunities and challenges.

Conclusion

In summary, UNCG's Speaking Center is one of many across the nation that allow for vital moments of professional development. Consultants are challenged to collaborate and adapt while in a structured setting of comfortability and low conflict. The qualities identified can serve as an alterable template for other communication centers, to increase room for professional growth and development within their consultants, and also the efficiency and longevity of centers in their entirety.

References

- Apker, J., Propp, K. M., & Zabava Ford, W. S. (2009). Investigating the effect of nurse-team communication on nurse turnover: Relationships among communication processes, identification, and intent to leave. *Health Communication, 24*(2), 106-114.