

Organizational Culture: Comparing Faculty and Staff Perspectives

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A university's organizational culture influences students' overall educational experience. One critical aspect of a positive campus cultural experience is the strong sense of community largely established by a constructive working relationship between faculty and staff. The current study focuses on sources of potential conflict in faculty-staff relations that could negatively influence this organizational culture, and thus, inhibit positive student educational experiences. The study uses 272 questionnaires collected from faculty and staff at a private Midwestern university. Findings indicate that greater staff involvement in decision-making, clearer communication of roles and responsibilities, and an adequate rewards system can reduce faculty-staff tension.

INTRODUCTION

Students' satisfaction with their overall educational experience is contingent on a university's organizational culture (Elliott & Healy, 2001; Nishii & Dominguez, 2000). Therefore, to remain competitive, both public and private universities must examine their institutions and adjust policies to ensure a healthy organizational culture, as this may have an impact on student retention (Del Rey & Romero, 2004; Van Vaught, 2008). A strong sense of community among employees is critical to achieve a strong campus culture (Biggs, 1981; Florenthal, Tolstikov-Mast, & Yilmazsoy, 2009). This sense of community is largely created by positive working relations between faculty and staff (Florenthal et al., 2009). Research shows that when the two groups feel content with their working environments, the institution is productive and students feel drawn to it (Kusku, 2003).

When examining college campuses, previous research has focused on student and faculty populations (Szekeres, 2006; Volkwein & LaNasa, 1999). Yet over the past decade, staff have grown more central to the university's effective operation, with their role receiving only limited attention (Fuller et al., 2006; Szekeres, 2006; Volkwein & LaNasa, 1999). Moreover, as universities adjust both to rapidly changing educational environments and market demands (e.g., increased use of technology), the employees most likely to implement any necessary changes are staff (Szekeres, 2006).

Implementing new policies requires effective interaction between faculty and staff, since the two groups' differing perspectives may contribute to creating a conflict of interests. The debilitating effects of interpersonal conflict lead to employee dissatisfaction and indicate a weak organizational culture (Fuller et al., 2006; Martin, 2002; Volkwein & LaNasa, 1999).

Therefore, this study focuses on sources of potential conflict in faculty-staff relations and looks for solutions to help reduce or eliminate those sources. Social and functional sources of faculty-staff relations are examined. Faculty and staff perceptions of these two types of sources are compared to identify discrepancies that can lead to potential conflicts of interest. The two groups' perceptions of solutions are also compared to determine which strategies and policies the university should implement to resolve and reduce potential conflicts in faculty-staff relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Increasingly, as universities have recognized the importance of productive faculty-staff relations for organizational success, enquiry into faculty-staff relations has grown more popular both inside and outside the United States (Helmes & Price, 2005; Krebs, 2003; Szekeres, 2006; Whitchurch, 2007). Existing faculty-staff research reveals that both faculty and staff agree on the importance of constructive workplace relations to provide the best educational experience for students (Helmes & Price, 2005; Szekeres, 2006; Florenthal et al., 2009). The objective in establishing constructive workplace relations is that faculty and staff will treat one another with mutual respect in order to accomplish organizational goals (Florenthal et al., 2009).

Typically, the work environment influences (a) the amount of work employees complete, (b) attitudes toward the work place, and (c) employees' sense of community (Biemiller, 2008; Florenthal et al., 2009). In addition, instances of poor communication (e.g., perceived differences over roles, responsibilities, or organizational goals) coupled with a lack of respect for nonteaching staff lead to faculty-staff tensions (Briggs, 1981; Florenthal et al., 2009; Krebs, 2003; McCluskey-Titus, 2005; Whitchurch, 2007). When they feel appreciated and engaged, nonteaching staff express a greater commitment to university goals and exhibit a more positive attitude (Florenthal et al., 2009; Houston, Meyer, & Paewai, 2006).

Current studies reveal that when tension exists in faculty-staff relationships, it becomes a main source of staff dissatisfaction with their respective work environments. This paper examines faculty-staff relations to determine each side's perceptions of (a) causes for faculty-staff tension and (b) possible strategies to resolve or reduce such tension. This research is of particular importance, because physicians and psychologists have found increased work-related stress negatively affects employee health. Research shows that occupational stress weakens employees' immune systems and can increase the rate of infection and cardiovascular disease, affecting their overall sense of well-being (Hapuarachchi et al., 2003). Concerning universities specifically, physicians and psychologists argue that if university staff become burned out (particularly at early stages in their careers), new, talented personnel will be reluctant to apply for positions at these institutions (Houston et al., 2006; Johnsrud, Heck, & Rosser, 2000). University staff experiencing significant work pressure will be less satisfied with, and committed to, their jobs and experience lower morale, resulting in increased turnover (Houston et al., 2006; Johnsrud, Heck, & Rosser, 2000).

Thus, reducing and managing relational tension between employees is critical to establishing a successful organizational culture (Martin, 2002; Schein, 1992). Organizational culture is the organization's personality, expressed by its members through their behavior (Martin, 2002; Meyerson, 1991; Schein, 1992). Faculty/staff tension will communicate a culture of confrontation and create an unfavorable image of the university for existing or incoming students.

HYPOTHESES GENERATION

Perception of Relations

Universities are considered highly stratified environments in which employees are categorized into one of two "castes"—faculty or staff (Henderson, 2005). This stratification is referred to as *rankism*, typically an important, necessary tool of organizational management (Ingram, 2006). However, rank-based mistreatment in the workplace can result in disrespect, inequality, discrimination, ridicule, and exploitation of the lower-ranked members (Ingram, 2006).

Typically, top-level university administrators and faculty are perceived to be more capable at executing administrative decisions compared with staff (Blackmore et al., 2010; Henderson, 2005). As a result, staff frequently report feeling unappreciated and unheard as regards their concerns. In addition, relations between faculty and staff can be mostly strained or nonexistent when faculty attempt to control staff workloads (Blackmore et al., 2010; Ingram, 2006; Olson, 2006). According to Duggan (2008, p. 47), despite serving the college, “and its faculty and students, nonteaching staff are often marginalized, [and] their experiences and inputs, frequently discounted.”

Previous research suggests that faculty-staff relational tension can be attributed primarily to poor communication (Biggs, 1981; Florenthal et al., 2009; Krebs, 2003; McCluskey-Titus, 2005; Olson, 2006; Whitchurch, 2007). For example, at one university, tensions between faculty and librarians were reported, due to miscommunication and perception issues (Biggs, 1981). “Communication, cooperation, and mutual planning are needed and must be initiated by librarians, but faculty need to listen and participate with as much energy and as broad a view as possible” (Biggs, 1981, p. 196).

Studies report that poor communication also can be attributed to staff when its members feel under-informed (Florenthal et al., 2009), lack understanding of faculty’s job responsibilities (McCluskey-Titus, 2005), and/or lack clarity about their own job responsibilities (Davies & Owen, 2001). Another reason for faculty-staff communication-related conflicts is confusion on both sides concerning which elements might constitute an effective faculty-staff partnership (McCluskey-Titus, 2005).

The importance of salary and other benefits as motivators to work in a university varies between faculty and staff. Although faculty mentioned that pay and compensation issues influence their job satisfaction (Galaz-Fontes, 2002), their commitment to the organization was attributed more to intrinsic motivators (e.g., satisfaction with the academic components of their jobs) rather than extrinsic factors such as salary and working condition (Fuller et al., 2006). Staff, however, place more emphasis on salary satisfaction (Kusku, 2003). They place the highest importance on dissatisfaction with salary, followed by relations with university management (Kusku, 2003). This discrepancy in motivational factors has the potential to influence faculty and staff task-related priorities and thus leads to relational tensions.

Tremblay, Sire, and Balkin (2000) argue that, in general, employee perception of the organization’s approach to pay distribution is a good predictor of feeling satisfied with the pay, the job, and the organization. At the same time, employee perception of the organization’s approach to benefit distribution is attributed to standards of organizational practice (that includes policies, structures, and actions of a particular organization; Tremblay, Sire, & Balkin, 2000). Therefore, to assess faculty and staff perceptions regarding causes for mutual relational tensions related to poor communication, and concerns over salary and benefits, the following hypothesis was generated:

H₁: University faculty and staff differ in their perceptions regarding the causes for tension in their reciprocal relationships. In particular, staff believe more than faculty do that

- (a) poor communication about being valued and assigned responsibilities creates tension between the two groups, and*
- (b) unequal hiring conditions, such as salary and benefits, are causing tension in relationships.*

Perception of Solutions

The following strategies have been suggested in the literature to improve the effectiveness of faculty-staff relations (McCluskey-Titus, 2005): (1) better understanding of faculty/staff schedules and organizational responsibilities by both faculty and staff, (2) conducting a workshop for faculty and staff (attended together) to form collaborative partnerships, (3) including faculty in the university administrative staff hiring process (Barden, 2005), (4) providing more opportunity for staff and faculty to work together (Davies & Owen, 2001; Szekeres, 2006), and (5) providing clearer communication of organizational strategies and goals.

In terms of benefits, many universities provide developmental opportunities to motivated and committed staff as a means of demonstrating appreciation and increasing employees' long-term commitment. Funding developmental workshops off campus and providing resources to improve the work environment (e.g., regular renewal of office equipment) are some of the strategies universities have used to nurture and maintain job satisfaction among staff (Blackmore et al., 2010). Such benefits help staff achieve career goals and ensure a healthy work-life balance (Blackmore et al., 2010).

University strategies used to improve faculty-staff relations can be categorized into administrative and social activities. Barden (2005), for example, argues that staff should participate in the hiring process for top administrative positions. Staff may be better suited to assess whether a candidate has the necessary administrative qualifications to lead colleges and departments successfully. Conversely, faculty are more focused on the teaching and research qualifications of candidates for top administrative jobs and may not be as suitably adept at assessing administrative skills (Barden, 2005; Rhoades, 2005).

The staff voice is under-represented in many institutions (Barden, 2005; Rhoades, 2005; Whitchurch, 2007), but staff are usually highly capable professionals who should be more engaged in the university decision-making process "to expand academic democracy beyond tenure-track faculty and senior administrators" (Rhoades, 2005, p. 5). For example, lower-ranked employees can suggest improvements to a committee process or bring a complementary perspective to committees and task forces (Ingram, 2006).

The importance of staff engagement in organizational decision-making is supported in the literature. According to Fuller et al. (2006), university prestige is less important as a reward to staff and administrators than the way they are treated within the organization. Staff place a high value on the institution exhibiting a caring stance toward their well-being, valuing their contributions, and respecting their opinions. In contrast, faculty place a high value on the university's prestige, which influences their loyalty and commitment to the institution. Consequently, Fuller et al. (2006) suggest the following human-resource strategies: involvement in decision-making, procedural justice, pay for performance, and opportunities for training. Based on the above conceptual differences of faculty and staff, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H₂: Staff believe more than faculty do that greater staff involvement in university administrative activities will reduce tension in relationships.

METHODOLOGY

A two-step process for data collection was used. The first step was exploratory and included in-depth interviews with faculty and staff (Florenthal et al., 2009). Based on the themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews, a questionnaire was designed. The questionnaire consisted of five-point scale questions and was distributed to faculty and staff. The final sample included 272 completed questionnaires. The sampling method used was quota, controlling for equal gender distribution and a proportionate distribution of faculty and staff, according to the university ratio. In addition, a proportionate representation across colleges and departments for both faculty and staff was ensured during the data-collection process. Definitions of who should be considered faculty, staff, or administration were included in the questionnaire to reduce ambiguity in self-categorization of participants.

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive characteristics of the sample. The sample corresponds to the proportionate distribution of faculty and staff in the university, which employs significantly more staff than faculty, the ratio being about two-thirds staff to one-third faculty. Gender is represented fairly equally, with females represented at a slightly higher share (54%). The sample is skewed toward faculty and staff hired less than 6 years ago. This group represents about half of the sample. The staff in the sample have worked at the university on average for fewer years ($M = 7.0$, $S.D. = 6.75$) than have the faculty ($M = 10.7$, $S.D. = 8.97$). Finally, the sample participants interacted significantly with each other, but on average, more faculty-to-staff interactions occurred ($M = 2.8$, $S.D. = 1.36$) than did faculty-to-faculty interactions ($M = 1.5$, $S.D. = 0.92$).

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE
(N = 272)

| Characteristic | Frequency (%) or Mean (S.D.) |
|---|---|
| Position at the University | Frequency (%) |
| Faculty | 36 |
| Staff | 61 |
| Administration | 3 |
| Gender | Frequency (%) |
| Male | 46 |
| Female | 54 |
| How long have you worked at the University? | Frequency (%) |
| Less than 6 years | 52 |
| 6–10 years | 17 |
| 11 or more years | 31 |
| How long have you worked at the University? | Mean (S.D.) |
| Staff | 7.0 (6.75) |
| Faculty | 10.7 (8.97) |
| On a weekly basis how often do you interact with: (scale: 1 = often; 5 = rarely) | Mean (S.D.) |
| Staff | 1.5 (0.83) |
| Faculty | 2.3 (1.35) |
| On a weekly basis how often do you interact with staff : (scale: 1 = often; 5 = rarely) | Mean (S.D.) |
| Staff with staff | 1.4 (0.79) |
| Faculty with staff | 1.5 (0.91) |
| On a weekly basis how often do you interact with faculty : (scale: 1 = often; 5 = rarely) | Mean (S.D.) |
| Staff with faculty | 2.8 (1.36) |
| Faculty with faculty | 1.5 (0.92) |

DATA ANALYSIS

Table 2 summarizes the results of a one-way ANOVA performed to reveal differences in faculty and staff perceptions concerning causes and solutions for relational tension. Both faculty and staff agree that relations had remained almost the same over the past two years. Faculty ($M = 3.5$, $S.D. = 0.84$) marginally differ from staff ($M = 3.3$, $S.D. = 0.70$) in perceiving that relations improved slightly over the past two years. However, when comparing faculty and staff who have worked at the university two years or more, no significant perceptual differences can be discerned.

The significant sources of tension between faculty and staff can be attributed to *unequal benefits*, *not being valued*, and *poorly understood roles*. For these sources of tension, staff perceived them as significantly greater contributors than did faculty. In presenting solutions to reduce tension, social activities were perceived to have been less successful or helpful by staff than by faculty. Faculty ($M = 3.4$, $S.D. = 0.88$) perceived past social events to have been significantly ($p < 0.05$) more successful than did staff ($M = 3.0$, $S.D. = 0.09$). Faculty ($M = 3.5$, $S.D. = 1.05$) had significantly ($p < 0.05$) greater confidence in the ability of more social events to strengthen relations between faculty and staff than did

staff ($M = 3.3$, $S.D. = 0.91$). Finally, faculty expressed significantly ($p < 0.05$) higher inclination than did staff to participate in mutual lunchtime social activities ($M_{\text{faculty}} = 3.3$, $S.D. = 1.29$; $M_{\text{staff}} = 2.6$, $S.D. = 1.11$) and a marginally ($p < 0.10$) higher inclination to participate in a mutual book club ($M_{\text{faculty}} = 2.4$, $S.D. = 1.33$; $M_{\text{staff}} = 2.1$, $S.D. = 1.21$).

Staff ($M = 3.7$, $S.D. = 0.90$) perceived committees that involve faculty and staff as marginally ($p < 0.10$) more helpful than did faculty ($M = 3.5$, $S.D. = 0.99$). The marginal difference could be explained by staff interacting on average significantly ($p < 0.05$) less with faculty than faculty interact with other faculty ($M_{\text{faculty}} = 1.5$, $S.D. = 0.93$; $M_{\text{staff}} = 2.8$, $S.D. = 0.92$). In addition, staff expressed a significantly ($p < 0.05$) higher inclination than did faculty to attend intramural sports ($M_{\text{staff}} = 2.6$, $S.D. = 1.26$; $M_{\text{faculty}} = 2.0$, $S.D. = 2.0$) and off-site community service events ($M_{\text{staff}} = 3.0$, $S.D. = 1.12$; $M_{\text{faculty}} = 2.6$, $S.D. = 1.31$).

TABLE 2
ONE-WAY ANOVA RESULTS
(N = 265)

| Questions | Mean (S.D.) | | Sig. |
|--|-------------|------------|-------|
| | Faculty | Staff | |
| In the past two years faculty/staff relations have... (scale: 1 = significantly worsened; 3 = neither; 5 = significantly improved) | 3.5 (0.84) | 3.3 (0.70) | 0.062 |
| If there is tension between faculty and staff, how much can be attributed to: (scale: 1 = not at all; 5 = very much) | | | |
| Unequal benefits | 2.5 (1.05) | 2.9 (0.99) | 0.005 |
| Not being valued | 3.1 (1.26) | 3.5 (1.04) | 0.012 |
| Poorly understood roles | 3.0 (1.21) | 3.4 (1.11) | 0.011 |
| How successful were past social events? (scale: 1 = very unsuccessful; 5 = very successful) | 3.4 (0.88) | 3.0 (0.09) | 0.002 |
| Indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements: (scale: 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) | | | |
| • Social events including both faculty and staff outside of work would strengthen relationships | 3.5 (1.05) | 3.3 (.91) | 0.041 |
| • Committees involving more faculty and staff working together would be helpful | 3.5 (0.99) | 3.7 (0.90) | 0.099 |
| How likely are you to attend the following staff/faculty events? (scale: 1 = very unlikely; 5 = very likely) | | | |
| Book club | 2.4 (1.33) | 2.1 (1.21) | 0.094 |
| Lunch time socializing | 3.3 (1.29) | 2.6 (1.11) | 0.000 |
| Intramural sports | 2.0 (1.18) | 2.6 (1.26) | 0.000 |
| Off-site community service | 2.6 (1.31) | 3.0 (1.12) | 0.004 |

Faculty and staff did not differ significantly ($p > 0.10$) on several issues (Table 3). On average, both perceived communication to be effective ($M = 3.8$, $S.D. = 1.04$). Unfair pay was not perceived as a high-tension contributor ($M = 2.9$, $S.D. = 1.10$). Lack of communication was perceived on average as a contributor to tension between faculty and staff ($M = 3.6$, $S.D. = 2.17$), although the standard deviation around the mean is high.

TABLE 3
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR QUESTIONS IN WHICH FACULTY AND
STAFF DO NOT DIFFER
(N = 265)

| Questions | Mean (S.D.) |
|---|-------------|
| How effective is the communication between faculty and staff within your college/department? (scale: 1 = highly ineffective; 5 = highly effective) | 3.8 (1.04) |
| If there is tension between faculty and staff, how much can be attributed to: (scale: 1 = not at all; 5 = very much) | |
| Unfair pay | 2.9 (1.10) |
| Lack of communication | 3.6 (2.17) |
| Indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements: (scale: 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) | |
| • More than one faculty/staff forum per year would be helpful | 3.4 (0.87) |
| • Improved communication between faculty and staff would be helpful | 3.9 (0.81) |
| How likely are you to attend the following staff/faculty events? (scale: 1 = very unlikely; 5 = very likely) | |
| Holiday party | 3.6 (1.23) |
| Picnic | 3.6 (1.11) |
| Athletic event | 3.3 (1.36) |

Some solutions that both faculty and staff agreed on were more forums that include faculty and staff ($M = 3.4$, $S.D. = 0.87$) and improved communication between faculty and staff ($M = 3.9$, $S.D. = 0.81$). In addition, faculty and staff were both somewhat likely to attend holiday parties ($M = 3.6$, $S.D. = 1.23$), picnics ($M = 3.6$, $S.D. = 1.11$), and athletic events ($M = 3.3$, $S.D. = 1.36$).

CONCLUSIONS

The first hypothesis stated that in contrast to faculty, staff place a higher importance on hiring conditions and quality of communication as sources contributing to faculty-staff relations. This hypothesis was partially supported. Staff perceived *unequal benefits*, *not being valued*, and *poorly understood roles* as being more important in contributing to relational tension than did faculty. Even so, the two groups did not differ significantly concerning two sources of tension—perception of unfair pay and lack of communication. Both faculty and staff believed that both sources somewhat contribute to relational tension.

In terms of solutions, some were perceived as more attractive by faculty, whereas others were perceived as more attractive by staff; several were similarly attractive to both groups. Thus, the second

hypothesis was also partially supported. In terms of administrative activities, staff thought it would be helpful if faculty-staff committees were formed. On the other hand, faculty perceived that both groups' participation in social events would be more helpful to reduce tension. Further, faculty were more likely to participate in two social events, book club and social lunch. These results support the second hypothesis.

Staff expressed higher interest than faculty in participating in intramural sports and off-site community service. Both groups perceived an increase in faculty/staff forums and improved communication as strategies that could reduce relational tension. These results are not consistent with the second hypothesis.

The findings in this study suggest that certain communication strategies and hiring conditions contribute to faculty/staff tension. According to some faculty suggestions, such tensions could be minimized if the hiring process were revised: for example, allowing staff participation in evaluating a candidate's administrative qualities. As hiring conditions cannot be easily changed, communication strategies should be improved. In particular, message dissemination from top administration regarding staff contributions and their responsibilities should be significantly improved. Moreover, the results indicate that social events are important to both groups but should be carefully chosen, as some are more attractive to faculty (e.g., lunch) and others are more attractive to staff (e.g., intramural sports). Both groups, however, expressed the wish to participate in athletic activities, picnics, and holiday parties.

To conclude, organizational culture is the personality of an organization (Budd, 1996; Schein, 1992). It encompasses values, beliefs, and norms that are expressed by organizational members through their behavior within the organization (Martin, 2002; Meyerson, 1991; Schein, 1992). As research shows (Florenthal et al., 2009; Martin, 2002; Meyerson, 1991), members do not always agree on all organizational practices, because they hold multiple identities or positions, have diverse value systems, and apply different meanings to organizational manifestations (Florenthal et al., 2009). At the same time, if disagreements lead to relational tensions, administrators should intervene to create a supportive environment in which organizational members can work toward accomplishing organizational goals. Clear communication reduces employees' sense of ambiguity over peers' responsibilities. Engaging university staff in decision-making processes enriches decision outcomes and increases socialization opportunities between faculty and staff. Finally, fair benefits enhance employee job satisfaction and morale (for staff, in particular), thereby increasing their commitment to their institution, which ultimately strengthens the organizational culture.

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