



The Perfect University Employee

By Matt Adams, P.E.

If you have been working in this industry for at least a few years it must be clear how many shining stars there are among us. It doesn't matter how high or how low morale is at your institution at any given time, there are those plant staffers who seem to thrive regardless. Sometimes it seems that we pay too much attention to those who don't "shine," or seem disgruntled under all circumstances. Why is this? I hope we haven't lost sight of what makes educational institutions so great: the people that they comprise. When you step back and take a look at work life within our profession, it is really something pretty incredible regardless of the obvious difficulties. We should pay closer attention to those among us who have long ago figured this out, and perhaps rethink our perceptions of our contribution to the institution.

WE ARE DIFFERENT

In every industry there is often the perception that there is some big entity, such as a corporation or senior management, which makes decisions selfishly, keeps all the profits and stifles the "little man." Perhaps in some industries this can be true, but at universities? I don't think so.

Coming from someone that has seen many, many universities from just about every viewpoint, I can tell you that there is no conspiracy or plan to take advantage of the very individuals who keep each institution alive. The leaders of our institutions are doing their level best to nurture the university and its

staff, faculty, and students. The stars of our departments have figured this out and see the institutions for what they are: learning, educating, and researching entities that represent something much bigger than just their name. They represent the thoughts and efforts of those who work, learn, and grow there. These stars know that to believe anything less short-changes the true meaning of university culture, and even discredits those who have and continue to invest

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so much into the cultural equity of the institution. For that matter, if you really don't feel like you are contributing to part of something greater than your daily task and pay, why bother staying? You can make more money working for the corporations that might actually live up to your fears regarding profits and the sacrifice of the employees.

EQUALS

The stars of our profession have a role that equals that of the teaching faculty. Part of the common experience that binds us together are the interactions

and relationships with those faculty and staff that make up the institution. As I have written about several times, many of the stars within the housekeeping, grounds, plumbing, and other shops are a significant source of interaction and ultimately a connection to the institution.

It's no surprise that most housekeepers prefer to work in residence halls. The feeling of connection to and from the students reminds each employee of their role in this larger purpose. Have you noticed that the stars of our departments always know some students by name? Coming from someone who rarely meets any students while on campus, I am impressed with these individuals and their connections to the students.

Oddly enough, it's relatively easy to avoid any meaningful interaction with students on campus. You can complete your job and stay as detached as you want and miss one of the "connections" that reminds us of what the larger purpose of our job is. In fact, I have made an effort to meet the students who work within plant departments or attend committee meetings. Without this I tend to forget just how mature and clever these young people are. Their spirit and energy is easily absorbed and certainly sparks my loyalty to the institution. If you are not already one of the stars that actively engages the students, become one. It is a part of the process of reconnecting with the meaningfulness of your profession.

WHO'S WATCHING

It can be said that we are best defined by how we behave when nobody is watching. Here too, there are many within our plant departments who work the same way when seen or unseen. It's common and inspiring to see individuals or small teams of trade staff working alone in mechanical rooms for long periods without anyone noticing. These people demonstrate a dedication to their

trade, as well as the university, that is much more meaningful than simply trading time for money.

Regardless of what we do for work, there are times when we make decisions that can make a small, incremental difference in quality, savings, or service that might not ever be noticed by others. The shining stars of our profession make these little efforts many times a day, week, and month. This is one of the many ways that we keep our institutions going within ever decreasing budgets. It makes sense to feel and work this way, and we should all respect those that have this ethic.

If you were working for your family, you would work this way out of a sense of loyalty, love, and purpose. As they say, two out of three isn't bad, and this is why so many of our peers make the extra effort in small unnoticed ways. If you don't

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feel a sense of loyalty and purpose with your institution, you are missing perhaps the most meaningful part of your career.

EMBRACING SOMETHING BIGGER

You can really boil it all down to a simple test. If you are a shining star, or the "perfect university employee," you have decided to embrace the idea that you are a part of something bigger and more important than yourself, your department, or the money. Some students only spend four years on campus, yet

feel like they were a part of something great and stay connected in many ways for the rest of their lives. Why wouldn't those of us who work at a campus for years choose to participate in the same esprit de corps? Some around us do, and they have chosen to embrace what distinguishes our career choice from so many others. ☺

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