



The Elephant in the Room

By Matt Adams, P.E.

Recently at the APPA Leadership Academy in Tampa, the class of Track III had a vigorous discussion regarding the “elephant in the room” of institutional management. In this track, we teach managerial effectiveness and make every attempt to make the subject matter relevant for our institutional facility managers and leaders.

On the third day of class, we show a great video of former General Electric

CEO, Jack Welch, describing his views on promoting, developing, and, if necessary, removing his direct reports. His candor and energetic simplicity is fascinating. He makes many great points, but when he discussed the need to remove or fire some staff, our class of leaders began to feel disconnected from his message. In the corporate world of GE, leaders can (and do) fire direct reports for either lack of performance or demonstration of values that deviate from those expected within GE.

On the other side of the coin is the fact that managers who did perform and demonstrate commitment to the company values were rewarded with one or more rewards of pay raises, bonuses, or even stock options. After 25 years in APPA I have yet to hear of any of our peers earning bonuses or stock options. So this is the “elephant in the room”—the fact that we are expected to lead effectively, but without the traditional tools of management at our disposal.

SO LET'S TALK ABOUT THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

If a retired executive from GE were to visit one of our institutions, he or she would quickly realize that the business environment we operate in includes few of the traditional tools for either employee development or termination. Track III class participants often fall into two groups: those who feel frustrated with the lack of tools for staff management, and those who expend energy and creativity to make it work within the confines of our institutional rules.

There is clear evidence of solutions to this perceived managerial handicap. This evidence comes in the form of peer institutions with great moral and highly productive staff. If these many institutions are able to achieve many of the same winning performance indicators as the private sector, our situation must be manageable. What are the managers of these facility departments doing that some of us are not?

At Moravian College, the associate director for facilities, Kim Sherr, is convinced that overcoming any management shortcomings and being successful in staff development is “not that difficult.” She believes that subscribing to the belief that we as managers have few options to lead effectively is equivalent to following the herd—“Don’t do it!” To Sherr, the same philosophy of valuing the individual that is embraced in education is also an effective tool for management. In other words, to manage someone without the corporate gimmicks one must go deeper. “Put yourself in their shoes. Are their staff needs that different from yours?”

Clearly our staff doesn’t expect big bonuses or stock options. What they seek and relish are less tangible, but perhaps more important: family, respect, dignity, support, assurance. As a leader these are values that serve as reward, and are an integral part of staff development within an institution. This makes a great deal of sense.

While we have many institutions that enjoy high morale and productivity, there are a great many without. In these places staff perceptions are so



common as to almost seem like clichés. When asked, they report feeling a lack of respect shown by the management of the institution. They commonly complain of not being properly informed of managerial decisions or new policies.

They also complain of severely punitive and bureaucratic systems and policies, demonstrated by time recording procedures that demonstrate distrust and add wait time, as well as approval systems for materials that are inordinately cumbersome. These policies are punitive to staff without there having been any infraction committed. To Kim Sherr's point, would I as a manager be motivated if the director imposed similar rules upon me that clearly illustrated a lack of trust?

HOW TO THINK LIKE AN ELEPHANT TRAINER

There exists a new class of leaders that are rising within our industry and who have energy and new ideas. Another of these is Jim Jackson, director of facilities maintenance & operations at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. Jackson takes the elephant metaphor a little further. He believes that as a manager in the institutional environment he needs to think like an elephant trainer. In other words, to most, making an elephant do anything on command is virtually impossible. However, the trainer has learned what motivates the elephant, and they build a win-win working relationship. Jackson believes he has learned what motivates his staff at UNL.

Regarding the values recognized at UNL, Jackson has learned that the majority of his staff responds to professional satisfaction. This satisfaction comes in a variety of forms, some new some old. One of the best tools used at UNL is the extension of trust and responsibility to reporting staff.

Jackson believes that rather than only relying on one "go-to" person as many of us do, one must reach out to everyone as often as possible. He gives each of his reports a chance to take a chance and succeed. This success is rewarded with both

recognition as well as more responsibility. He has learned that a typical UNL building services staffer wants to demonstrate results and find professional satisfaction. He encourages this staff to repeat the same approach at every level so that the potential "performers" from the bottom to the top are nurtured and developed. I have visited UNL many times and I have witnessed an authentic "can-do" attitude.

REWARDS COME IN DIFFERENT SHAPES AND SIZES

While financial benefits are not at our disposal, many of our peers have found other ways to reward staff. Many provide lunch to staff as a reward. However, some have gone beyond that and awarded staff with small gifts that are specifically for them to share with their family or friends. While simple, this distinction is significant. Why not reward a staff member with a gift certificate to

take his or her family to dinner. In this way many more emotions are touched, such as pride and support of family. This reaches that person on a much more personal and meaningful level.

Another institution uses small micro vacations as a reward. While not officially a part of the university policy, one director awards half-day passes with pay as one of a variety of incentives. To virtually anyone, a half-day-off pass used on a Friday is as good as a bonus!

Like some many best practices within APPA, we have peers that are really working hard to come up with new solutions and winning strategies. Dealing with the "elephant in the room" is no exception. The elephant can be taught to do what others believed was impossible. 💰

Matt Adams is president of Adams FM², Atlanta, GA. He can be reached at matt@adamsfm2.com.



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