The Importance of Listening

By Salvador Rodriguez and Tom Polansky

This month's Membership Matters columns features an interview with Salvador Rodriguez conducted by Tom Polansky. Salvador shares his APPA story and management style evolution, taking us through the ways that he, his employees, and his department have changed and grown over time.

Tom Polansky: *What was the state of your department when you started your current position?*
Salvador Rodriguez: I arrived at San Joaquin Delta Community College District (SJDC) in 2006. At that time, the facilities department had just completed a reorganization where they consolidated the vacant custodial and grounds supervisor positions into one management position and title, which I hold today. During that time, the employees performed the best job they could with little to no management or oversight. There was no leadership, vision, or accountability, and I must admit they did a pretty good job. I had no office, no computer, no files, and a pencil and pad of paper. As a first-time manager, I had my work cut out for me.

TP: *At the time, what did you think your biggest problem was?*
SR: There were several ongoing issues, but at the time, I felt the biggest problem was that the employees were not following directions or communicating. I felt confident as a subject expert in both the custodial and landscaping trades. I owned and operated a computer repair business, so I felt confident in my management style.

Blessed with the opportunity to work at my first management position at the college, I suddenly found myself as a small fish in a big pond. Eager to learn the correct way of managing personnel, I was disappointed to find out there was no mentoring program for new managers such as myself, and no

professional organizations I could utilize. The only suggestion from the marginal director was that if I was not writing employees up, then I was failing as a manager and not doing my job. As a former CSEA (California School Employees Association) union activist and member intern, I knew a lot of these write-ups would not hold up in the grievances process, and indeed, I lost most of them. Nevertheless, eventually I got their attention, and, in time, realized that in order to improve my winning percentage, I needed to draw an objective conclusion to measure performance. I soon discovered APPA, the panacea for all of my problems!

TP: *How did your conversations with PCAPPA (Pacific Coast APPA) folks help? What things did you learn?*
SR: Bound by years of marginal directors who could care less about my desire for the leadership training I had been begging for, I was finally allowed to attend the APPA/PCAPPA/BAYAPPA joint conference 2017 in San Francisco. Elated with this opportunity, I was a first-timer and recognized with distinction. I was awestruck by listening to members describe the successes they had been having at their organizations. Searching for answers and finding solutions within the APPA training courses offered was not enough. I also learned about APPA's credentialing program, vendor partnerships, and drive-in workshops. Mostly, I wanted to become an effective leader and not just a titleholder.

At the conference, I decided to become involved in the organization and stopped by the Small and Community Colleges Committee (SCCC) booth, where I met up with Thomas Polansky. Tom provided me with several resources, such as the APPA mentoring program and APPA's Supervisor's Toolkit training. I found that I mostly learned by listening to other

professionals during our monthly SCCC calls. My APPA mentor was Robert Andrews, and he was a tremendous help. I soon discovered the importance of holding one-on-one meetings with each of my employees.

TP: *How did you first start the culture change in your department?*

SR: I became committed to changing after attending the joint conference in 2017. I went back to work excited, filled with hope and direction. Those beautiful feelings were immediately diminished by the attitude of the director; for whatever reason, I was not to attend any more conferences or training, nor could I implement any of APPA's workloading. I became more vocal as I spoke out about this oppressive behavior and demanded change, and there was willingness for me to resign. Suddenly, both of the supervisors left the organization, and I seized the opportunity to grow and change the culture. I read up on Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and attended the Supervisor's Toolkit. I reached out to Toney Lawson, CSEA's job steward for my area, and shared my vision of inclusivity, open communication, empathy, and sharing of grace. He embraced the change but with guarded optimism. Over time, I have demonstrated my desire for change, not with speeches or with PowerPoints, but with real action.

TP: *How did your definition of the problems change over time?*

SR: It only changed when I educated myself and took a hard look at myself, my actions, and mostly my words. Suddenly, I realized that it was not the employees' fault for producing mediocre results, because they were only reacting to the culture that the institution and I had created. I cannot control the actions of others, but I can control my reactions and try to communicate effectively. I had to change my perspective; you could call it a paradigm shift in thinking and reframing my perception of reality. For the most part, I do not believe employees are the problem; however, that's not to say that I do not have marginal employees who require a lot more energy.

TP: *How did you get the staff to "see the light"?*

SR: I started to communicate, communicate, communicate, and to use active listening skills. Today, before I move forward with any changes in procedures, I express my intent to the union leaders, to my department leadership team, and then to the newly formed Custodial Success Group. During this process, I field any questions they may have, and take any concerns or ideas they have into consideration. Then when we meet as a department, a decision is made based upon modified consensus. This allows everyone to have a voice that will be seriously considered at multiple levels.

Furthermore, I no longer live or die by an arbitrary decision that I've made. Instead, I allow for flexibility. When seeking consensus, I ask the team how this decision affects the experience of students, employees, and managers at the college. A decision is made based upon improving the experience in all three paradigms.

TP: *Did you need to give up some control to bring the staff into the solution?*

SR: I don't believe that I gave up control since I didn't have it to begin with. Achieving positive results through people is what makes a good supervisor. It is my responsibility to make sure that I am understood. As much as we managers believe, we simply cannot control people and their actions—it stifles critical thinking skills and creativity. I found that what works is to increase open communication. But what does that look like? I can certainly talk up a process that I believe is achievable, but I must have the crew's buy-in for success.

For us to achieve our goals, I believe in Covey's approach of seeking first to understand and then to be understood. I also gained many tools from APPA's Supervisor's Toolkit, especially when it came to communication. I realized that I need to take time to actively listen and ask questions of staff. Assumptions are a huge part of the problem, and for good reason. In our busy lives, assumptions are a communication shortcut, because to communicate effectively is time-consuming.

TP: *What was your biggest surprise in this whole process?*

SR: That I am the problem. I feel strongly that change management rests with me and my ability to listen first and then speak—your words are powerful and meaningful. This process is complicated because I have had the wrong image (or map) of what managing people and personalities in a culturally diverse community college is about.

Also, that I changed my perspective. My subordinates don't work for me now; I work for them. I am responsible for providing them with the tools to work effectively and efficiently. Their happiness at work does increase productivity. I work every day to

ensure that I use power phrases when speaking. The relationship that I have with the critics and marginal employees has changed from adversarial to, at best, a willingness to understand. The performance coaching and two-minute challenge from the Supervisor's Toolkit have helped me focus on performance and not personalities.

However, I have had setbacks. Recently, twice in one week, my coaching on "how to communicate" turned into an embarrassing situation for myself and the same employee! I was arrogant and felt my communication style was best. Instead, I needed to step back and recognize the pattern of communication this person has, and just shut up, listen, and then ask questions. I fear that as these setbacks start piling up, it will negatively impact employees' willingness to engage in open dialogue without retribution. So, to counteract this, I publicly apologized for my actions. Yes, I did! It was OK to say I'm sorry, because humility set me free from carrying those emotions of failure or blame.

TP: *What would you tell others in your same situation?*

SR: First, reach out to APPA leadership for assistance and direction. Look at yourself and determine your intention for any policy or process you intend to implement. Does it improve the student or customer experience? Share ideas not only with management but with the employees you work for, and ask for their feedback. Explain why this change is essential and what the intended results are. Set up small workgroups with constituents such as union and/or lead personnel. Employees want a say on subjects that affect their daily lives. For example, I trust the custodial leadership, and the Custodial Success Group (employees only) to help with some of the decision-making. Then, I have meetings with each employee about every six weeks. The meeting is not to point out failures, but to listen from their perspective about what project they feel proud to show me. This allows me to see it first-hand and to thank them for a good job. Areas that need improvement are framed in terms of what resources are necessary for success. Ask plenty of open-ended questions, and don't assume! Failing is an option because "fail" means **F**irst **A**ttempt **I**n **L**earning.

Finally, I ask employees how I am performing as their manager, then I ask myself, would I want to work for me? At first, all of this may seem like a lot of work, and it is, but time is a tool, so use it to fix critical issues and to foster real change. Ultimately your team will become more efficient, the meetings will get shorter, and the focus will change from problems to a shared vision of win-win.

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