

Learning on the Run 10: A Staff Engagement Model Useful for Feedback

How to provide feedback to science leaders that don't know when to allow for more autonomous staff behavior?

The Request. The Director of a State Department of Health wanted to support the transition of a newly hired Manager of the Public Health Laboratory and requested the help of an external organizational consultant. The Laboratory was responsible for cutting edge forensics, epidemiological studies and tests for various the public health community clinics around the state. The Lab Manager was on the cutting edge of health policy and health related analysis since he had run a similar lab for a smaller city in another state. His knowledge and reputation for running a "tight ship" were highly valued by the hiring committee. In his first 9 months, he rightly saw the need to create more structure and control for the staff.

Larger Context. The Public Health Lab was located in an outlying area of the state. All the professional staff lived in the small surrounding community with less than twenty thousand residents. The former Lab Manager had been asked to take an early retirement because of this hands-off leadership style. He had been in retirement mode for the last few years of his tenure working directly on a pet project. The Lab lacked strategic policy direction and as well as daily oversight for several years.

Several staff conflicts were ever present with little or no resolution and coalitions were formed to deal with the perceived threats and inequities. Most professional staff were doing the bare minimum, working autonomously on work that suited them individually and there were no meetings to coordinate work. Also, there was very little cooperation or coordination with the clinics they served. The Department Director recognized that the new Lab Manager was strong on policy and procedure, but would need additional coaching in leading an improvement effort to increase morale and accountability. Throughout the intervention, the Lab Manager continued to be unresponsive to communication, and absent for or late to relevant meetings.

Consulting Intervention. After his first six months on the job, the Lab Manager agreed to a request by his supervisor that he engage in a strategic planning and feedback exercise that would involve all 25 staff members. In addition to creating strategic direction, principals of professional behavior were also developed by the staff. Lastly, the new Lab Manager exchanged expectations with staff at an all-hands Transition Seminar¹. He was given constructive feedback that he was overly authoritative; he was unprepared and reacted defensively. Later, as some staff began to step up and behave in more professionally accountable ways, he would not delegate more responsibility.

The Department Director, the Lab Director and the consultant met to debrief the intervention. A graphic model of engagement was presented. In that way, everyone could see the history and potential trajectories for how engaged staff were likely to act. This created a neutral way for the leadership to discuss their choices and the likely impacts that could be expected.

Last Line. When delivering feedback to a highly resistant client who values science, using a model to explain the historical steps and current choices can help to reduce a defensive reaction.