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## The team environment at Oregon State University

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## BACKGROUND

Most of us in libraries understand that our profession's future lies in its ability to anticipate and act upon the changes taking place in our environment. How a particular library responds to change will, of course, vary with the organization and with the forces internal and external that drive it. At Oregon State University, one campus response to change was to accept recommendations of a 1992 study by management consultants KPMG Peat Marwick that called for combining

University Computing Services, Libraries, and Communications Media into a single Information Services unit headed by an associate vice provost for information services (IS). A faculty review of the report added Telecommunications to the new unit.

In early 1995, in an all-staff meeting of the newly reconfigured unit, the associate vice provost said that her goal for IS was to have a truly integrated unit that would leverage

resources efficiently. To accomplish this task, several work groups were appointed to review the current organization to see where duplication of efforts was taking place. After several months of study, a report was put forth to the associate vice provost for information services recommending that IS be reorganized into a team-based organization. Originally five teams (later six) that seemed most likely to succeed were designated as formal teams, meaning they would be provided with team building skills that would help them to become self managed. These teams would be a model for the rest of the IS organization.

The teams and their managers (now called sponsors) participated in team training programs led first by an outside consultant and later by a team trainer employed by IS. It was during these early sessions that the team based organization of IS was articulated and refined. A new vocabulary was instituted where terms such as "sponsor," "team boundaries" and "handoffs" were defined as a means of clarifying roles and expectations. Thus a sponsor was that person who was responsible for coaching the team, for imparting the vision of IS and the campus to the team, for bringing work to the team and for helping the team become self managed. Boundaries identified the area within which the team had full decision-making authority and hand-offs described how responsibility was transferred from the sponsor to the team.

### WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

The road from 1995 to today has been bumpy and winding, with false starts, set backs and confusion. The plan to stay with six teams went awry because

several people were on two or more teams, making it difficult to remember when to practice team skills and when not to. Within the year, most IS staff were meeting as teams and were doing their best to practice team skills. Other difficulties arose when learning what it meant to be a team. Did being on a team give each member equal voice in all decision making? What about individual expertise? What about decision making – would consensus rule? And finally what was the role of support staff in a team environment.

This last question is perhaps the most interesting. What does it mean for an organization when librarians and support staff come together as a team to make decisions affecting the library. Will each individual's knowledge be valued? Although most libraries rely on a committee structure with both librarians and support staff serving together, these are frequently short-term committees charged with recommending a solution to a specific challenge. How would this change when departments were eliminated and replaced by teams who had responsibilities for not simply recommending solutions but for implementing them as well? Finally, how would questions of equity—especially salary equity—in a team based environment be dealt with?

The experience at IS is still too recent to provide definitive answers to any of these questions. However, some trends are emerging. One clear trend is that while training in team building skills benefits everyone in the organization, many of the support staff are embracing the training with enthusiasm. Although the OLA has a long tradition of providing continuing education, many library support staff in IS were reluctant to take the time away from work to attend such sessions. Today, team training is required of all formal teams, and it is available to everyone else in the organization. The training, which includes such topics as learning to provide feedback, learning to manage meetings, learning to achieve win-win solutions and learning to resolve customer satisfaction, is providing support staff with developmental opportunities they might not normally receive in a traditional organization.

On the down side, many support staff and librarians believe that training and team meetings are taking too large a percentage of their work day and are preventing them from providing the quality service that IS values. However, as an organization, IS continues to support the view that an investment in team training will result in a healthier and more flexible organization, one that will be better equipped to handle changing customer expectations.

Participation on a team where librarians and support staff are working to identify and solve problems has enabled some staff to find a voice that might not be heard in a more hierarchical organization. This is true partly because of the team training, but also because working as a team sets an expectation that anyone willing to contribute will be heard. To help ensure that this is true, many teams have used out-

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side facilitators to ensure that no one person or group dominates discussion. Moreover, since many support staff have volunteered to serve as facilitators to other teams, they are not only improving their skills but they are learning about parts of the organization with which they may have been less familiar. This is particularly true in IS because many library staff members (and librarians) were uninvolved of the work taking place in the other IS units.

Another benefit of the increased contact between librarians and support staff is an increased understanding and appreciation of the work done by each group.

This is not to say that the library is one happy family and that the us-and-them syndrome has disappeared, but there appears to be a growth in mutual respect and the realization on the part of everyone that leadership exists throughout the organization. There are two aspects of the new organization that cause equal conflict for support staff and librarians, and this has to do with the use of authority and with peer evaluations. In an effort to put more responsibility into the hands of the front-line worker, IS is committed to an organization that will result in self-managed teams. This means team members will take on increased responsibility for decision making and

for participating in peer evaluations. This can be an exciting time for some team members but frightening and confusing for others. Team members (either support staff or librarians) may choose to avoid assuming new responsibilities because they feel they are not paid to do so. Similarly, team members may be reluctant to participate in peer evaluations because they feel unqualified to do so. In each of these situations, the organization must have clear guidelines from its human resources department in order to reassure the team that they can indeed take on these duties.

Working for a team-based organization provides opportunities and worries for everyone in the organization, support staff members and librarians. For the organization, teams provide a way to ensure that decisions on how a task should be undertaken are determined by those closest to the work. As the teams learn to function efficiently and believe they are responsible for their work, decisions should be made more quickly and with greater customer awareness than is frequently the case in many libraries. For individuals, whether support staff members or librarians, teams offer an opportunity to exercise greater responsibility over their work environment and realize some of their own hopes and ideas. It is not an easy road but it is worthwhile. 



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