

Changing the academic culture one goal at a time

It is that time of year again. Time to make resolutions and set goals for 2016. You can have personal goals, “I want to lose ten pounds or train to run a marathon”. Or, relationship goals, “I want to be nice to my spouse or better motivate my children to do well at school”. And, there are your professional goals. For academics, this is typically “I want to publish in the best journal possible or complete the revisions to the paper that was just returned from the journal”. Or, maybe it is teaching goals, “I want to be a better teacher and be more organised in the classroom or learn all of my student’s names by the first two weeks of class”.

All of these are important and good goals but I would like to suggest that those of us that work in a university environment consider adding a new goal to our list. “I want to be a better colleague in my work environment”. That is, I want to suggest that we work to consciously take off the critical hat, the competitive hat that we have been trained to wear and replace it with a cooperative hat, a supportive hat to create a better workplace for ourselves and our colleagues.

It is interesting that most of us reading this journal are in the academic environment. We have been hired in to universities or colleges where we are supposed to be collegial and supportive. But, anyone that has spent much time at a university or college quickly finds that many academics have fallen into the trap of “doing unto others, as others have done unto them” creating a culture that is unproductive and backbiting. They do not follow the golden rule but do the opposite and perpetuate the negative, creating a hostile environment that no one wants to work in. Faculty stay home to “research” when in reality I would guess many of them are just trying to avoid the negativity and confrontational environments that are found in the corridors of the ivory tower.

A good friend of mine likes to call it, “Revenge of the nerds”. That is, some very intelligent people have risen to the top but to get there they were not necessarily treated well so when they get to the top and have the power, they use it to be negative and unproductive. They have in the back of their minds; I was treated poorly by the reviewers, so I will do the same. Or, I was made to feel like a second class citizen until I had tenure, so that is how I will treat our junior faculty. We are even worse on our colleagues that are our temporary faculty, our adjuncts and clinical professors. They did not do the work to get a doctorate so they cannot possibly add the same value as a full, tenured track or tenured faculty with a doctorate in hand. They are only on the job for a class or two so clearly they do not know as much as I do.

If we all tried to work on this goal, we could change our academic culture to one where respect is important and cultivated. Where we take on the role of a coach or mentor and we help to make sure our employees, all of them, have what they need to succeed and flourish. This is how a successful business runs. The employees are assets to be invested in and valued. With positive reinforcement and constructive criticism not negative reviews and rude treatment. Where the environment is friendly and fun with people wanting to come in to work rather than stay home and avoid any chance of confrontation. Here are some areas that most of us in the academy could improve upon in order to make our work environments stronger and healthier so we all can be more productive and enthusiastic about our profession.

Relationships: consciously create relationships with your colleagues. Go out for lunch, coffee, a glass of wine after work. It is very hard to talk bad about someone you have gotten to know and be friends with.

Experiences: as with relationships, shared experiences can also bring colleagues together. Retreats, field trips, conferences if they are done together provide common bonds or friendships that again tend to keep one from being uncollegial or rude to someone you have gotten to know well. In these environments you often combine business with pleasure.

Successes need to be celebrated: it is important to congratulate your colleagues when they have had a success. Positive reinforcements make everyone feel more valued and better about the job they are doing.

Positive environments create productive environments: remove the negative discussions from the water cooler.

Enthusiasm: is catching hiring a few people with enthusiastic, can do attitudes can quickly have a positive impact on the rest of the department or college. This is particularly productive when the leader is positive as we follow the lead of our leaders.

Communication: if your colleagues feel they can honestly and openly express their opinions and that they will be listened to, they will be much more likely to roll up their sleeves and join the team. This goes for all members of the team, the permanent and temporary faculty, the staff and the administration. Everyone needs to be kept informed and everyone needs to be comfortable expressing their opinions and concerns.

Trust: this is the key for any group to work well together and is particularly important in the academic environment. Our research and our teaching is based on telling the truth and we have to do the same with each other. Once colleagues cannot trust each other the backbiting begins and the respect is gone.

In my mind, if we all took on these goals this year, to create an environment where we worked on creating relationships with our colleagues, created shared experiences, celebrated our successes, thought positively and enthusiastically about our role in shaping young minds, honoured open communication and felt like we could trust our colleagues we would go a long way towards creating a professional environment for ourselves that was fun and fulfilling. Would not that be a refreshing resolution? To have an impact not only on our own lives but on everyone else we interact with. I am going to give it a try, will you?

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