

From Fish! To PEEP

A Journey in Reward and Recognition

By Marcy Simons

As a Supervisor, the most challenging thing to do is motivate staff, especially when your staff are at the bottom of the food chain! In September of 2002, I realized that the morale of my staff in the Stacks Management department of Hesburgh Library at the University of Notre Dame was reaching an all-time low. Absenteeism was a problem, the staff felt like no one else in the library respected what they do, and we were one year away from making a very large move into a newly renovated Lower Level with movable shelving, and I would need everyone on board to accomplish this monumental task. I knew that I had to do something, but wasn't sure how to go about suggesting and implementing change. The most significant issue for my staff is the fact that their job is physically demanding every day, and yet they are the lowest level in the Library. While I could lament with my staff regarding pay issues, I knew that money surely wasn't the only thing that would make them happy. I began to read everything I could get my hands on regarding ways to motivate staff, came across the FISH! book—skeptical that it would hold any information I would be able to use. I was delighted to find that it made perfect sense to use with my staff - we could look at ourselves as “just” shelvers, or choose to decide that we have the most important job in the library - if we don't do our job, and do it well, no one can find the material they need for their research. In other words, the library can't function without us!

The first thing to do was speak from the heart. I told the staff that like them, I was experiencing disappointment in my career—I had just earned a master's degree, and had not expected to still be JUST the Stacks Supervisor six months later! I realized while reading the book that my attitude needed changing as well so I told the staff exactly that. First I had to make the choice myself—how was my attitude? What did I convey to the people around me? How do I get them to see the value in choosing a positive attitude? Only I can choose my attitude—whether I will be pleasant, or grouchy. I gave the staff the choice and in this first meeting, asked only that they would agree to choose their attitude. Over that first week, I hung up signs in the area saying “choose your attitude,” but didn't say anything else verbally. We met back in a week with everyone in agreement that they were willing to try a new way of looking at things.

The four components of FISH!, a plan that Seattle, Washington's “World Famous Pikes Place Fish Market” fishmongers came up with, are: Choose Your Attitude, Play, Be Present, and Make Their Day. With play, we realized that even though we work in a library, where it was always assumed that we needed to be quiet, austere, dull, and boring, there are plenty of ways to add energy to our day! One staff member bought a treat for each of the other staff, placed it somewhere on their floor with a riddle that had to be solved in order to claim the prize! Another brought in jokes and hung them up in the area; I led them on a scavenger hunt to our meeting place (Starbucks!). They realized that it was okay to laugh and have fun at work—and still be serious about getting the job done.

Being present is the hardest component of FISH! because it means giving someone 100% of your full attention. Not talking and doing email at the same time, actually looking the person in the eye and listening to what they have to say instead of thinking about what's for supper. The staff had some great ways to implement this concept—with children and spouses at home, with co-workers, and when talking on the phone. We all make a more conscious effort now to give whoever we're talking to our full attention, but this concept is definitely still a work in progress.

Make their day was my favorite concept to tackle. First I needed to find out from the staff what would make their day, and I did this by handing out a brief questionnaire—what motivates you? How do you like to be rewarded? What is your favorite thing to do? I make a point of showing them how much they are appreciated whenever possible. By asking them the questions, I empowered them. At the end of 6 weeks, we had a mini-retreat and talked about what we learned with FISH!; what we wanted the rest of the library to know about us; we made small changes in the way we do our jobs; we had a name change approved for our unit from “Stacks Maintenance” to “Stacks Management”. Most importantly, I trust them, give them permission to fail, treat them with dignity and respect; and recognize them for their achievements.

After the first few weeks of trying out our FISH! concepts, other staff members started to notice that things were different; then managers noticed a change in the staff; and finally we were asked what exactly we were doing! Today we are a whole new unit, absenteeism is no longer a problem, pay is still an issue but everyone chooses to continue to give 110% to the job without complaint, and I am seeing staff members grow in ways that I never would have thought possible before.

In March, we anticipate formalizing our on-the-spot recognition program, called PEEP (Privately Eyeing Excellence Program).

Look forward to the next article from Marcy Simons: Learning How to Work Within Your Sphere of Influence.

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We would love to hear your **feedback** on this article!

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