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From FISH! to PEEP: Instituting a Recognition Program in the Midst of Budget Cuts

By Marcy Simons

This article is Part II of a series on using FISH! Philosophy at the Hesburgh Library, University of Notre Dame (IN). The first article appeared in the [February](#) issue of LW (2, no. 2).

With the successful implementation of FISH! within the Stacks Management department, we were all ready to make believers out of the rest of the library, and then the economy took a downturn.

Spring of 2003 brought rumors and innuendo of large budget cuts across the University; by June we were informed of the reality of those budget cuts—raises for everyone would be 1.5% across the board, with nothing extra for merit. In comparison to the 3–4% “cost of living” increases we were used to, this was a huge blow to all University employees. That wasn't the worst of it—in order to meet the new budget figures for the next fiscal years, large cuts had to be made in book budgets, and of course salaries. This news made it difficult to continue boosting morale of the lowest paid staff who had already exceeded all expectations with the move of 500,000 volumes in a five-month period.

The thing I have been most proud of is the commitment of our Library Director to not losing staff—no positions would be cut, and no one would lose their job. What happened instead brought challenges of its own.

When a position became open due to someone leaving or retirement, it remained open—in fact there needed to be 15 positions open by the end of the year to balance the budget. As these positions opened up, the reality of that decision began to take on new meaning. Already overworked and underpaid staff were being called on to do the seemingly impossible, and as we inched toward the second year of budget cuts, we began to look at those things that “had to go.” What things were departments doing that could be eliminated? How could our processes be streamlined? Were there things we were doing before as a courtesy to patrons that could be eliminated?

Supervisors who had always taken pride in their units and their ability to “do it all” heard not only the pressures from staff, but felt the crunch additionally with no time for self-improvement, no conference opportunities, and no time to brainstorm new ways of doing things!

To the credit of our library administration, they too realized that change was happening all around us, and that we needed to look at our internal organization in the midst of growing despair. An outside consultant was brought in and a survey on communication practices within the libraries was the first undertaking.

The results of that first survey showed exactly what the staff already knew—there was so much bad news being delivered that communication had come almost to a standstill. Based on the results of that survey, our consultant recommended that we form two working groups to address the main issues of concern for staff: communication and reward/recognition.

Thus the members of both the Communications Working Group and the Performance and Recognition Advisory Groups were selected and began meeting in July 2004. Both groups again surveyed library employees on ways that we could communicate better, and preferences for receiving rewards and recognition.

The survey results were both expected and surprising. The lack of communication within departments had become an issue for almost everyone; and there was inconsistency throughout. Meanwhile, the recognition survey showed that for the most part, staff were happy with their University benefits; however, within the libraries, some employees hadn't even been told “thank you” in a very long time, let alone “rewarded” for anything.

We quickly realized that creating anything new meant we needed to look closely at our culture and what the University Libraries values not only as it relates to our mission, but even more importantly our daily realities and how we treat one other.

NEXT: Town Hall Meetings and PEEP unveiled.

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