

### *Merit Staff Focus Groups on Engagement*

University Human Resources sponsored a series of focus groups during July and August of 2008 seeking the best practices for creating and maintaining a positive work culture for University of Iowa merit staff represented in collective bargaining. Because these employees are covered by the labor agreement between AFSCME and the State of Iowa, these 4700 University employees do not participate in Staff Council or many other forms of shared governance on campus.

Research has shown that a positive work culture supports the health, productivity and engagement of employees with their organizations. This focus group dialogue was intended to complement the Working at IOWA survey, which is a collaborative effort for continuous improvement and increased engagement of employees in the University's work environment.

Senior Human Resource Representatives from each of the colleges and major divisions were asked to nominate individuals for participation in the focus groups based upon a set of preferred qualifications:

- At least one year of employment at the University in a merit system position covered by the AFSCME collective bargaining agreement.
- Demonstrated above average job performance, as documented by their most recent performance evaluation
- Demonstrated leadership skills, either through activities related to work, local shared governance, or through personal interests and activities
- Effective communication skills

All staff members nominated were invited to participate in a focus group. Those who responded formed three groups. While the original concept was to involve a cross section of blue collar, technical, clerical and security staff, most of the nominees and all of the respondents were clerical staff. The individuals participating came from academic and service units of both the University and the hospital (see participant list attached), but were not inclusive of all colleges/divisions.

Each group was asked to identify:

- Best practices for creating and maintaining a positive work culture at both a department and University level;
- Specific strategies to improve merit staff engagement with their work; and
- Suggestions to improve communication with University merit staff members.

The scope of each focus group was strictly limited to matters outside of the scope of the current collective bargaining agreement between AFSCME and the State of Iowa.

Each group discussion was led by Kevin Ward, facilitated by Pat Kenner, with Nancy Kroeze acting as note taker, all from University Human Resources. Each group met three times, once on each topic of discussion. The common themes from these discussions are summarized below.

***Creating and maintaining a positive work environment.***

The following practices were identified as contributing to a more positive and productive work environment. Their existence contributes to engagement, and conversely, the absence of these may contribute toward a lack of engagement:

- ***Cross training.*** Cross training facilitates better coverage and work distribution during absences. Sharing tasks as a work team also provides for more variety and interest.
- ***Flexibility.*** Knowing that the department will work with staff to address personal needs, and be open to solutions that provide mutual benefit.
- ***Everyone knows the goals of the unit.*** Having a clear sense of mission and how work tasks contribute to the success of their local unit. Some also find engagement in connecting to the University's mission and goals.
- ***All levels of employees are treated the same.*** Recognizing that differences exist in the work of faculty, professional staff and merit staff, the more that all can be treated similarly and interact as part of a team working together makes a positive work environment and supports engagement.
- ***Everyone is included in meetings.*** Being invited into operational and strategic discussions within the work unit supports engagement.
- ***Staff are respected and valued as individuals.*** Supervisors respect and appreciate the engaged individual and values their efforts to do a job well and/or go above and beyond expectations. Suggestions and ideas are welcomed and considered.
- ***Recognition/Social events.*** Having the opportunity to mix with others within or across work groups contributes to a greater sense of being valued and of community within the work group.

***Strategies to improve merit staff engagement.***

Specific strategies were identified for units working to increase the engagement of their merit staff:

- ***Effectively train and support supervisors in creating and maintaining a positive work culture and how they can contribute toward the success and engagement of their staff.*** Supervisors need to better understand both what contributes to and what detracts from a healthy and productive work environment.

- ***Provide recognition for a job well done; help staff feel rewarded for their accomplishments.*** Find meaningful ways to recognize good work, formal and informal. Sometimes a simple “thank you” and/or a note of appreciation mean a lot.
- ***Communicate with staff so that they can be fully aware of what is going on in the department.*** Understanding the context of their work and the broader work unit creates more opportunity for engagement, as well as having access to information regarding current events elsewhere in the University.
- ***Express how their role has an impact on the department and that it adds value.*** Understanding the “big picture” allows individuals to connect to the success of the unit and gives meaning or purpose to their effort.
- ***Provide opportunities for two way communication.*** Individuals appreciate knowing that they can approach and have a meaningful conversation with leaders in their immediate area, making them more engaged. The annual performance evaluation can be one opportunity to provide feedback from the employee to the supervisor.
- ***Provide opportunities to participate in interviewing processes and search committees.*** Participating in the interview processes and search committees for individuals working in their unit, along with the opportunity to express their opinions creates more ownership and engagement.
- ***Support participation and development.*** Staff members are supported in pursuing their goals for growth and development, and are encouraged to participate in activities as part of the University community.

***Suggestions to improve communication with merit staff members.***

Conversations about communication addressed specific suggestions for email:

- “Don’t be too wordy” - make emails shorter and bullet important information so that it can be scanned quickly for key points.
- The “subject line” often determines a decision to read or not to read, so it needs to be clear and succinct.
- Who the email is from may also determine if the email will be read. For some, local email may be more important, while others pay particular attention to messages from University leadership.
- Campus mail may get more attention at times, because it is different from the many emails received.

In general, local communication is seen as being of most interest and importance. Events at the college and/or University level often seem distant to merit staff. With regard to departmental communications, suggestions included:

- Weekly or monthly staff meetings that include all levels of employees.

- Individuals knowing that they can have two-way communication with their supervisor.
- Email should not replace opportunities for more personal interaction.

Staff members look to resources such as *fyi*, Noon News, or the University Relations list serve to stay current on information affecting the broader campus community.

### ***General Comments***

Many participants expressed their appreciation for having the opportunity to talk about their experience working at the University, noting that they had never had a similar opportunity. They also expressed their interest in additional opportunities to meet merit staff from other areas of campus and talking about common issues or concerns. One idea suggested was a Merit Staff Council focused on communication and work environment issues. They expressed a sense of commonality with each other, which may have reflected the fact that all participants were in clerical positions, although the original concept was to have a mix of job types represented within each focus group.

It was also clear that information does not consistently flow down through the organizational structure to merit staff. Some talked about regular meetings to provide updates and information of general interest, but others did not have an equivalent means of getting information on a reliable basis. This included information provided to HR representatives for dissemination. There were also concerns expressed about the effectiveness of some HR representatives.

Finally, as these focus groups were held shortly after the flood disaster on campus, many observed how the emergency had brought people together around a common goal. In this sense, the entire University community was “engaged” in working to help the University and each other. The tremendous efforts of the University during the flood demonstrate the power of engagement.

### ***Next Steps***

This report will be shared with the central Human Resource unit leaders and the Senior Human Resource Representatives for each college and division. At a minimum, this document provides a resource of best practices to use in coaching departments and supervisors in how to create a more positive and engaging work culture. These groups may chose to share the report more broadly or find other ways to utilize the information gained through the Merit Staff Focus Groups on Engagement.

Summary prepared by:  
Nancy Kroeze, Pat Kenner, Kevin Ward  
University Human Resources

September 2008