

Deep Design

Mary, the fictional manager in our series of management case studies is responsible for the administration team of her organisation. Recently Mary has been made aware by some of her staff that they are feeling taken for granted by other departments and that they are frustrated at what they believe to be unreasonable demands upon their time. A number of key staff has indicated their desire to look elsewhere for work.

As the administration manager Mary is aware of the contribution made by her department and the value they deliver throughout the organisation. At the same time Mary has witnessed for herself occasions when others have imposed themselves upon her team or have taken advantage of their service without so much as a word of appreciation. Mary is also aware that many other departments and programs, especially those working directly with end users, can appear to be more glamorous and inclined to believe that if it wasn't for them, those in admin wouldn't have a job at all!

Mary decides it is time to become proactive. Her plan is to achieve two things. Firstly, Mary wants to raise awareness amongst other departments as to how they perceive the contribution and value of her team, and secondly, Mary wants to raise awareness amongst her team of the big picture, where they fit into the overall mission and direction of the organisation.

Firstly Mary invites members of her department to work together and to meet with each other and to meet with people from other departments. The purpose of the meeting is to ask those participating about their experiences of working with those in administration, to identify how they perceived the activities of administration and to explore ways in which administration might improve their service delivery.

As a result of these meetings Mary and her co-workers received a small mountain of feedback, some of it positive and complimentary, while other feedback indicated a lower level of satisfaction.

The lessons Mary and her team took from this process were twofold. One, when you ask others for their impressions and perceptions you need to avoid arguing with their point of view. The key is to listen, take away the feedback and learn from it. Secondly, any request for ideas will result in a 'wish list' therefore avoid making any commitments on the fly. Take time to review and consult before making decisions.

As there was only some of Mary's team involved in the meetings, Mary then decided to make available all the feedback, in its raw, unfiltered state. This information was provided to all those employed in administration, along with an invitation to participate in a discussion forum. The aim of the forum being to discuss the feedback, analyse what might have been meant, look for the causes of people's perceptions and to map a way forward towards providing the best possible service.

All of Mary's team attended the discussion forum. Mary employed an external facilitator to guide the discussion. This left Mary free to be a part of the process rather than having focus on the facilitation role.

In bringing her team together in a common forum, Mary ensured openness and transparency. Everyone was involved and everyone had an opportunity to discuss any aspect of the feedback. It is important to this part of the process that titles and egos are left at the door. If politics and personal agendas are allowed to taint the process then nothing will be achieved. Similarly it is important everyone maintains an open mind and remembers that any criticism is aimed at their service delivery; not at any one person in particular.

The discussion forum was a revelation. Everyone engaged in the process. Everyone grabbed a marker pen and joined in the process of writing their ideas onto butcher's paper attached to the walls. This process enabled everyone to share each other's ideas and even to add to them. The result was a potpourri of ideas, suggestions, visions and strategies. Now it was time to enable reflection before taking action. Mary and team took the key points from the forum and condensed them down into a series of bullet points. Each person in administration was provided a copy to display on their workstation. The butcher's paper from the forum was retained and made available to people whenever they wanted to check something.

Over a period of several weeks staff in administration shared their ideas with each other. They began to view their work and service delivery from the perspective of others. In turn, other people coming into the admin area became aware of the feedback and heard for themselves the conversations taking place. Slowly the administration team began to formulate their ideas, they began to develop a strategy and they began to understand the value they contribute to the organisation. All this was achieved through the power of conversation.

We refer to this process as Deep Design. This is where we understand the operation and function of a department from both the perspective of those working in it and from the perspective of those it serves. This is a combination of the internal and external environment. This is high level awareness. Deep Design helps to understand the cause and effect of activities and the impact and leads to improved productivity and a more enjoyable workplace. You can do this with your department and the beauty is it costs little or nothing.

This management tip has been brought to you compliments of John Coxon & Associates. We have developed an Integrated Management Process (IMP), including a suite of diagnostic tools, designed to help you develop the potential of your management group and align their effectiveness with your mission, strategy and outcome. We work with management teams and managers in the health sector and not for profit sector in Australia and New Zealand. Telephone Australia (03)5561 2228 or NZ (0272) 583232. Email john@johncoxon.com.au or go to our website at www.johncoxon.com.au or www.johncoxon.co.nz. Please feel free to pass this information onto anyone you feel may benefit.