Change the Conversation by Building Your Community

By Sarah Browngoetz and Ryan Moritz

Have you had the experience of realizing that the person who occupied the seat at the beach-front bar before you, imbibed in a wet swimsuit? Have you ever forgotten your lunch and happily found that a thankful department had sent over bagels for everyone that day? People we never meet impact our environment all the time. Sometimes the outcome is to our benefit, other times it just makes us uncomfortable.

The residual effects of a less–than-stellar manager who has moved on or a lackluster predecessor can pigeon hole you with a reputation you did not earn. From sponsor representatives to researchers and their administrative staff, everyone you need to work with already has a preconceived notion of what they can expect based on their experience with whatever or whoever came before you.

It is an uphill battle to change established perceptions. Use these tips to dig out of a bad reputation, take control of the message and own your expertise.

Know the Goals

Start with acquiring a firm understanding of the mission of your new workgroup. If you want to be of value to your new boss, take an interest in his or her vision and make an effort to align facets of your professional goals with that vision. This will help you integrate smoothly into your immediate workgroup by identifying for yourself what you will get out of these new professional relationships.

Take time to understand where your work-group stands within the whole institution. Are you valued? Do your co-workers feel supported and respected? Are you, as a group, innovative and accommodating? Solicit feedback from other departments that can clue you in on how much work needs to be done to change perceptions. Identifying recurring problems that pop up across your grant portfolios gives you a place to start implementing positive change with the potential to improve your reputation.

An institution may meticulously map a process from the Principal Investigator to the department to the central office that looks good on paper but no longer works in actuality. Perhaps it was developed several years ago and has not been revised for new circumstances. Completing tasks a certain way simply because "we always have" indicates an office that is not engaged in their work. This can be a problem for central administrative offices who work with rigid sponsor guidelines which lead to a top-down approach to research administration in order to ensure compliance.

There are many areas where rigidity stifles innovation. Identify the processes that need to be flexible and open to improvised strategies. Solicit feedback from your clientele for the purpose of reworking stagnant processes that are outdated or cumbersome. The acceptance of the resulting processes will reinforce the idea that everyone affected by a system can make improvements to that system.

Build Community to Carry Your Message

If you find yourself working for a centralized office that is viewed as a bunch of button pushing watchdogs, but your boss' vision is that his or her workgroup be viewed as helpful guides through the bureaucracy of obtaining and managing research funding, you need to spread a new message. It could be: "I work with a team of research administration experts who are here to help you."

Find ways to convey this message in every interaction. Pepper your emails or phone calls with this message. For instance, instead of saying, "I will get back to you." say, "Give me a moment to talk to my awesome co-worker who is quite the expert on this. I'll consult with her and get right back to you." or say "That's an interesting interpretation, let me present it to my experts over here and see what they think." Then follow-up that day with working answers.

The job of re-establishing the institution's perception of your office starts with you. Create a buzz about your collective expertise by giving people positive, tangible things to say about you and your co-workers. Ideally, everyone within your workgroup will embrace the same message and deliver it to their circle of consumers. We all know people will talk, but it pays to remember that we can direct the conversation.

Soften the "No"

Research Administrators check charges for allowability, ensure compliance with match/cost share requirements, and tell departments and researchers which charges can and cannot be moved between awards. All of these activities create an environment ripe for negative messages.

"I want to order supplies on the day my grant ends, can I?"

"Too bad, those can't possibly be used within the period of performance. No."

"I want to purchase toner for the office printer, can I?"

"Nope, office supplies are not allowable as direct costs."

"Can I use my NSF award to match for a NASA Grant?"

"Uh, no."

Resist the short, curt answer; it does nothing to endear you to your campus colleagues. Instead, lead the inquirer through a conversation that illustrates the answer. By asking questions while withholding judgment, you create a safe space for someone to ask for help.

"Can you use all these supplies today?" "Why would you consider toner a direct cost?" I can't think of a time we've been able to match federal funding with federal funding, can you?"

Asking questions engages the inquirer's critical thinking skills, acknowledges their expertise, and makes them more likely to learn from the interaction. While our positions dictate that we find errors and point out flaws, if we deliver these findings with a positive spin, it becomes less likely that our researchers will see us as obstacles, and it builds respect for our expertise.

Remember, our jobs dictate that we ensure the sponsors' expectations are met and the integrity of the scope of work of the project is upheld. This is in the best interest of any researcher. It increases the likelihood of future funding, improves the reputation of an institution, and fosters an atmosphere of accountability. Any negative feedback should be framed with these factors in mind. We are not saying "no" because we enjoy it. We are maximizing the outcome of current projects and increasing the probability that future proposals will be funded.

Know Your Researchers and Their Work

Encourage outreach between central offices and researchers; it is far too easy for central offices to forget they work with research. There are no test tubes, beakers, or safety goggles in a grant and contract office. Rather, there are proposal budgets, invoices, effort reporting documents, FDP matrices, and endless e-mails in every inbox, none of which feels very scientific. Filling out an SF-425 feels more like completing an IRS form than something related to research. Because of this, administrators should take every opportunity to meet with researchers and departments. A visit to a lab is a reminder that there is real work performed behind the charges that show up on the grant ledger. This also shows a PI that the administrators are invested in the science.

Invite your researchers to visit your office. Let them see what that F&A is providing to them other than their laboratory. An in person visit can be used to reinforce the perception that administrators are essential to the research process. We take care of burdens that the PI would never want to perform; it does not hurt to remind them of that.

In order to erase the residual effects of a bad work environment, broken processes need to be fixed. The workgroup must work together to deliver a common message of change. Consumers need to see that change and be given the tools to discuss it within their workgroups. When this happens, you will know that you have successfully changed the conversation by building your community. **N**

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