

Choosing Our Leaders: Team Leader Selection and Review Processes at the University of Arizona Library

Carrie Russell, Undergraduate Services Team Librarian

Nancy Simons, Science Engineering Team Librarian

University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ

ABSTRACT

The University of Arizona Library, recently restructured to a flattened, team-based organization, has made a commitment to library-wide staff participation in planning and decision making. This paper describes how Team Leader Selection and Review Teams have used staff feedback, evaluative criteria, and consensus to make team leader selection and review decisions.

Introduction

In 1992, the librarians and staff at the University of Arizona Library began an 18 month process to re-design the library organization in order to facilitate the staff's ability to achieve the Library's mission and to meet new and changing demands of the University clientele. Throughout the design process, staff envisioned the new organization as user-centered, rather than collection centered, as one Library, rather than several departments, and as a place where staff at all levels participate in planning and decision making.

After months of organizational design team meetings and open house discussions, library staff unveiled a new library structure unlike any other. Its two most striking characteristics, the flattened structure that eliminates layers of hierarchy and the use of teams instead of departments, are corequisites. Without departments, departments heads and upper level supervisory positions, the organization instead relies on teams to "manage" the library. While a "self-managed" library was an ultimate goal of the new organization, library staff believed that, at least in the short term, teams would require strong leaders to be successful.

To ensure that the need for leadership in the new organization would be met, library staff suggested that each team have one member designated as team leader and developed position descriptions to clarify the leadership role. Team leader position descriptions reflected the expectation that team leaders would assume responsibilities for some administrative tasks such as managing personnel and participating in library-wide planning and budget processes. The position descriptions also reflected the expectation that team leaders would be active members of their teams performing many, if not all, of the same activities as team members. Team leader position descriptions characterize the successful leader as coach, advisor and facilitator for their team. Library staff were confident that these behaviors and attributes were present in existing members of the organization and suggested that all qualified staff, including former department heads and assistant university librarians, be given the opportunity to apply for one of the team leader positions. If no suitable internal candidates were identified, the Library would conduct an external search to fill the position.

Team Leader Selection Process

Library staff decided that one selection committee be formed to select all of the new team leaders. All permanent library staff were eligible to serve on this committee except for those applying for the positions. The committee consisted of the Dean of the Library (who served as committee chair), four elected librarians and four elected classified staff. The selection committee defined the selection process, received, reviewed and evaluated applications, and using consensus decision making, chose the applicants who would fill the eight new team leader positions.

The Selection Committee spent its initial meetings participating in team building exercises to develop shared commitment and to foster member confidence in openly discussing the unique concerns and issues it needed to address. Previously, selection committees at the University of Arizona Library served as advisory committees to the Dean. This selection committee would be the first to have full authority over hiring decisions. Another issue faced by the committee was the fact that only internal candidates would be applying. Strengths, and particularly the weaknesses of internal candidates were well known in the organization. Additionally, any qualified person was eligible to apply, not just former department heads and assistant university librarians, and the committee anticipated receiving applications from both groups. Finally, the committee fielded applications from candidates who indicated an interest in more than one of the team leader positions. While in hindsight these issues do not seem difficult, for a committee of librarians and staff comfortable in a hierarchical organization, these issues caused considerable concern.

During the team building session, the Selection Committee discussed and identified leadership skills they felt were required of team leaders and used these skills as criteria for evaluating the candidates. Leadership skills that the selection committee considered important in a team-based organization included having a library-wide perspective, a commitment to the success of others, the ability to share leadership and responsibility, a commitment to diversity, and excellent communication skills. To identify and measure these qualities, the Committee developed a rating form, a staff feedback form, and questions asked of all candidates to elicit information about these skills.

Candidates were asked to identify themselves by submitting a current curriculum vitae with a letter of application. The committee designed an interview process to facilitate widespread participation and encourage feedback from all library staff. Each candidate prepared a ten minute presentation to staff on their vision of the library of the future which was followed by a 30-minute question and answer period. The Selection Committee then held a one hour interview with each candidate.

All library staff were encouraged to complete the feedback form developed by the committee. The feedback form included an area for evaluating the candidates' leadership skills as well as space for comments about the candidate. The Selection Committee also asked staff to identify the candidates' strengths and weaknesses and to suggest questions to ask the candidates during their interview with the committee. Since all candidates were internal and known to many library staff, the committee requested that staff sign the feedback forms and "own" the comments they submitted. The Committee assured staff that their names would remain confidential. Over 300 signed feedback forms were submitted to the selection committee. Based on issues identified and suggestions for questions from staff, the selection committee composed three to four specific questions for each candidate. The Committee conducted interviews with each candidate and began its deliberations.

During team building, the Committee had received training in the consensus decision making style and established ground rules to guide them through the process. The committee agreed that open communication during the process was critical. All members of the group must feel that they have had a fair

chance to influence the decision. Voting must be avoided. All members may not agree with the decision, but each must be prepared to support it. While very challenging and time-consuming, the Committee was successful in applying this decision making model to all of their selection decisions.

Of the eight vacant team leader positions, the selection committee appointed six permanently and two on a temporary basis until a national search could be held. As recommended by Library staff, team leaders were given three-year appointments, after which they would be reviewed before a decision to reappoint them would be made.

The first three years of the new library organization had an unforeseen and dramatic impact on all library staff. Nearly all of the librarians and staff were assigned to new teams. Everyone needed to learn new skills, new jobs, and new behaviors to succeed in their positions and as members of a flattened, team based organization. Team leaders, perhaps more than other library staff members, had a great deal to consider and learn about their new leadership role.

During this transition period, the Dean of the Library requested that a librarian representing the Library Faculty Assembly and a classified staff member representing the Staff Governance Association join her in drafting a list of team leader expectations. The roles and expectations of all team members had been informally discussed, but this was the first formal process to outline those expectations specific to team leaders.

Team leaders were asked to share the draft document with their teams for feedback and revision and to gain broader understanding of the team leader's unique role in the organization. The original subteam met again to consider the feedback they had received and to rewrite the Team Leader Expectations document. The final draft was then distributed to all members of the organization. At this time, the Dean of the Library asked staff to consider it a "living document" that would change as needed. She asked that teams regularly review the document.

Team Leader Review Process

After three years, five team leaders, originally hired in the first team leader selection process, were due for their reviews. The purpose of the review was to provide the team leaders with feedback on how well they were meeting the expectations described in the Team Leader Expectation document and to hold the team leaders accountable for their performance. As in the selection process, the Dean proposed that a library-wide group be formed to conduct the reviews. The Review Team consisted of the Dean (who served as chair), a member of the Library Cabinet (a peer group composed of all the team leaders), and volunteer representatives from the Library Faculty Assembly and Staff Governance Association.

The Review Team, modeling the team leader selection process, wanted to solicit broad feedback from staff regarding team leader performance. However, during this process, the Review Team assumed that more staff would provide feedback if it could be submitted anonymously. The Team also modeled the selection process by using leadership qualities, now detailed in the Team Leader Expectation document, as criteria to evaluate the team leaders.

To collect feedback and to focus on these criteria, the Review Team asked that the University's Testing Center use the Team Leader Expectation document to develop a machine readable, evaluation form that could be completed by library staff interested in providing feedback on the team leaders under review. The evaluation form listed each team leader expectation as a criteria of performance. The forms also included a space for staff to include any general comments about the team leader. The forms did not include a space for staff to write their name, but were designed so staff could indicate their relationship to the team leader

under review - as a member of the team led by the team leader, as a fellow Library Cabinet member, or as a member of the library at-large who had contact with the team leader. The Review Team hoped that these relationship categories could be used to reveal a discrepancy between a team leader's rating according to member group.

The Testing Center supplied the Review Team with statistical data and results from the evaluation forms as well as a compilation of the comments received. The Review Team had hoped that statistical correlation could be made to indicate a team leader's particular areas of strength or weakness. Unlike the high response rate received from staff during the team leader selection process, only 25% of the staff completed the evaluation forms for the team leader review. Due to the low response rate, the Review Team could not rely on statistically valid correlations. However, the Testing Center was able to provide a breakdown of overall results by the relationship to the team leader category. This information indicated that team leader scores were relatively consistent regardless of whether they were rated by members of their own team, by fellow Library Cabinet members, or by members of the library organization at-large.

Review Team members discussed the data and read the comments for each team leader, noting team leader strengths and areas for improvement. The team then began its deliberations, considering one team leader at a time. Each member composed a review letter for one team leader, synthesizing the data and feedback from the evaluation forms. The Team revised the draft letters as a group, and using consensus decision making, determined the final wording of each letter and the term of contract for each team leader. The Team felt that team leaders had more to learn about their leadership role, so the review letters also recommended specific ways that they could be more effective. The Review Team agreed that each individual be given the opportunity to serve as team leader for another three years at which time s/he would undergo another review. The Dean met with each team leader to discuss their review letters, urged them to incorporate the feedback to continue their development as team leaders, and offered them a contract. She asked that team leaders share their evaluations with their teams and offered to attend future team meetings to discuss any issues the teams may have.

Conclusion

The team leader selection and review processes followed by the University of Arizona Library reflect the organization's new philosophies of broad participation in decision making and a library-wide perspective. We accept and expect a commitment from staff at all levels to make decisions about issues that have a major impact, including the selection and retention of the organization's team leaders. Consensus decision making has been a very effective tool for ensuring that critical decisions will be determined by library peer groups. This decision making style has been used successfully in all our subsequent hiring decisions and has now been accepted as essential in establishing buy-in and sustained commitment to our future. For both of these processes, staff initiated a new model of evaluation by using leadership qualities and behaviors, rather than skills, as criteria for effective performance. The team leader position continues to evolve as we learned more about its role in the organization. At this time, the organization anticipates that the team leader will be a necessary element of our flattened, team-based organization.

Copyright 1997 Carrie Russell and Nancy Simons