
Library Focus @ UEA

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IT'S TRAINING, BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT

At the University of East Anglia we have been experimenting with a series of optional staff discussion events. Library Focus is a series of six 40-minute lunchtime sessions, open to staff at all levels, looking at key issues: some very practical, like email management; others more philosophical, like empowerment and how to influence and negotiate. The full list of sessions was:

- Prioritisation and impact: Doing it all or doing what matters?
- Empowerment – what does it mean in practice?
- Email – who's the boss?
- Influencing and negotiating
- What is process review?
- Playing to our strengths

One issue for the library to overcome was a sense that its usual training sometimes felt imposed, and the way it had been structured led to some staff feeling excluded. For example, more junior staff might not get access to sessions that were traditionally regarded as management-related, whilst conversely senior managers might not have felt comfortable attending a course on email management. To illustrate this point, our first session was on work prioritisation, and we discussed this using examples from managers and administrators. The discussion soon took us beyond the traditional time management concepts of assessing what is 'urgent' and 'important' and we looked instead at 'impact' as a way to determine priority. One key question we considered was how often

decisions might be made for the convenience of library staff rather than for our users.

It was helpful to explore such themes in a more informal atmosphere, outside our usual roles and teams. In order to create the right environment, we decided to remove as much formality as possible. The sessions were also scheduled for lunch hours and attendance was entirely voluntary. The format of the sessions varied but tended to start with some questions or statements about the topic to stimulate discussion. For example, when looking at process improvement, we reviewed some extracts from Edward de Bono's book *Simplicity*,¹ which provided a very accessible introduction to the concept of process review. When we then touched on some specific process methodologies, such as LEAN and Six Sigma, the concept had already been de-mystified.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Those who took part seemed to benefit personally as well as seeing applications for their teams, as one of the participants, Deborah Burbage, now explains.

As someone who is already embarked on the process of chartership and embroiled in the world of professional development, I welcomed the opportunity to take part in the Library Focus sessions. The informality of the sessions was refreshing: not needing to book; not having to fill in any forms, nor to feed back to a manager afterwards, all added to the appeal, and more than made up for the fact that the meetings took place outside work time. The length of the sessions and the fact that they were repeated later in the week also meant that they could be accommodated in a lunch time even by library staff who only have a 45-minute break or who needed to work around rota slots.

In addition to these benefits, it was also valuable for staff to have the opportunity to get together with colleagues from different departments in an informal setting where each person present – from the Library Director down – was encouraged to share their views, although with no pressure to do so. On occasions I found that this opened up conversation with colleagues with whom I may rarely otherwise have crossed paths and this helped to foster a feeling of belonging to a wider team.

Each session included some activity, and often involved the chance to think about, or to some extent to challenge, one's pre-existing beliefs or expectations. For several of the topics covered it was clear that the ideas studied could be applied as much at home as at work;

for example, when looking at prioritisation by impact, or the skills needed for influencing and negotiating. It also became apparent that many of the ideas could often be applied with immediate effect and at any level or grade and that they would make a difference to the working day – for example, re-organising e-mail folders to speed up dealing with incoming mail.

The breadth of some of the topics covered meant that a 40-minute session could only provide a brief introduction or taster session for some quite elaborate concepts. A summary of each session was provided via a handout, which also contained references to the books consulted.

UEA offers a wide range of training opportunities for all its staff, but these Library Focus sessions appear to be unique in having summarised such vast topics into very manageable, bite-sized chunks which can equally well stand alone or serve as an introduction to further study or training.

Katherine Fox-Boudewign, Senior Shelving Assistant, added:

I found these sessions particularly useful as a new member of the organisation since they covered many of the questions you tend to find you have when joining an organisation afresh.

The issues we explored as a whole gave me the confidence to bring my own influence to bear in the early stages of my employment here and have also enabled me to understand how some of my colleagues already work, or to perceive the culture in which they work. This has been really valuable.

I think the session about conducting an 'impact' assessment was really useful; it has helped me to prioritise effectively across a range of tasks, projects and meetings. Since I found this method of prioritising so useful (beyond prioritising emails) I think it could be very useful as a more in-depth session.

I found the final session about identifying our strengths very thought-provoking and it has inspired me to look into this further. Perhaps a useful extension to this might be to think about how as an organisation/department/team we celebrate our strengths, and recognise, share and celebrate each others'?

EMPOWERING

We realised that these six sessions might occasionally uncover challenging issues within teams, so we made it clear at the outset that nothing that was said in the room would be fed back formally. Instead the aim was to empower staff to feel more

comfortable with raising issues within their own teams and initiating their own problem-solving activities, only escalating later if necessary. Although at first sight the topics did not seem to be linked, as the six sessions progressed we found ourselves frequently referring back to the previous sessions and building on what we had learned. We had about a dozen attendees each week and so reached a good percentage of library staff, with representation from all teams. The final session was on building on our strengths rather than our weaknesses, referring to Marcus Buckingham's materials² and the Gallup StrengthsFinder³ self-assessment tool. This was a fitting end to the series, emphasising the importance of focusing on what we can achieve rather than getting hung up on our limitations. We plan to follow up some of these sessions with more formal training, maybe even led by some of the staff who took part. It is my hope that this kind of peer-group learning, as an adjunct to more formal training, may lead to an enhanced training culture within our library service in the future.

REFERENCES

- 1 E. de Bono, *Simplicity*, London: Viking (1998)
- 2 M. Buckingham, *Now discover your strengths*, London: Pocket Books (2005)
- 3 T. Rath, *StrengthsFinder 2.0: A new and upgraded edition of the online test from Gallup's Now discover your strengths*, Washington, D.C.: Gallup (2007)