

Fermilab Employee Advisory Group Meeting August 5, 2010 – meeting summary

Issue 1: Reflections on HR

This discussion was conducted in executive session without senior management present in order to identify key employee issues and concerns related to HR, reflecting on the focus group results and personal experiences.

In initial discussion it was noted that all companies have an HR department and they are not all perceived negatively. Why is HR perceived so negatively at Fermilab? Does HR get the blame for poor management and bad communication? How much of this is their responsibility? Group members made the following observations:

- From a union employee perspective, the only time HR was present was when they were taking punitive action. Others noted that for many employees the only time they go up to the 15th floor is for a disciplinary problem. This kind of interaction certainly contributes to the negative perceptions.
- Since HR has made more of an effort to be seen, it creates less of an “us vs. them” environment
- Most employees do feel that there is no one up there to talk to. The lack of a *bona fide* ombudsperson is a real problem.
- Some members said that HR used to be a lot friendlier and a lot more personal. Members pointed out that HR personnel seem to have lost that and that they don’t know employees by name any more.
- However, some members noted that if you work on building a relationship with HR you can have had a very positive experience.
- One significant challenge seems to take place during hiring. Members said that the process can be very unpleasant and that they were treated unprofessionally and with lack of cooperation.
- Members said that it often feels like the individuals doing the hiring don’t know much about the actual jobs being filled and don’t want assistance in getting the job description correct. As a result, job descriptions and the actual job are often vastly different. The individuals in charge of hiring need to get out and understand the jobs and departments they are filling. Of course everyone is busy, but they need to make a priority to make these connections.
- Similar challenges are faced in getting promotions approved. Even when prepared with extensive backup for the promotion supervisors are faced with many questions that shut it down. It can seem like the objective is not to recognize and promote good employees.
- Members said that it working with HR can feel combative rather than collaborative.

- Employment status was also mentioned. Members said that there have been issues regarding exempt and non-exempt employees and HR has not been very effective at communicating these positions. Since the positions are already defined, members didn't understand why it was an issue?
- One example was given of trying to get a person in the right job category for four years.
- Members felt that it is easier to hire than promote. However, promotion was also challenging. They felt that the hiring process takes too long even after the choice is made. It can take five weeks or more to get people onboard. Members also expressed concerns that the laboratory might need more recruiters. When hiring, managers get many applicants, and many qualified candidates could end up overlooked. Members suggested that HR could make better use of technology. Fermilab has a Career Builder contract, but some members felt that tool was under used.
- Members felt that HR personnel seem to think that training fixes anything. Members felt strongly that just attending training doesn't fix everything and that HR did not monitor employees once they left training or follow up with employees. Members felt that HR personnel seem to shift responsibility, blaming the managers. Members also reflected on the course "Managing Within the Law," and how scared they were of doing anything after leaving the course.
- Members said that most people don't realize what HR personnel do. Benefits issues seem to be the primary reason that most employees interact with HR, and members said those experiences seemed to be positive.
- Communication is a huge issue, especially when changing policies or implementing new programs. The change in fair labor standards a few years ago was a perfect example: employees were not warned that this was going to happen. While communication is starting to improve, perceptions lag well behind. There seems to be much pent up frustration and employees don't want to take any more time to deal with these issues.
- Members strongly suggested that HR needs a receptionist/secretary to handle folks as they arrive on the 15th floor. There are not signs to direct anyone, so people wander around to find where they are going. People don't know who to go to with a problem. Members said that since HR is hard to navigate and unfriendly, many people don't go there at all.
- Some members suggested that the stigma scared people from visiting HR, even if for small reasons. Employees are afraid that if they go up to HR for any reason, it will appear on their records. This may not be true, but that is the perception and there is limited knowledge of what programs may be available to help and what does or does not go on one's record.
- Members noted that HR probably does have to deal with a lot of requirements and constraints, but they have not been effective in communicating this to the managers they work with.

- Members questioned the effectiveness of new employee orientation. Drawing on their own experiences, and what they see happening with their new employees, members mentioned that they were concerned about the disconnect between group orientation and the orientation that managers should give their employees. They were also concerned with the lack of additional information given during group orientation and the material covered in orientation. Members suggested some items to add to orientation, such as filling out the forms necessary to get computer accounts set up.
- HR is very good at handling very bad situations with employees.
- There need to be more effective ways of giving HR feedback and monitoring to see how performance improves over time
- Make a performance measure for HR as for any service organization (services should be organized to support the customer).
- HR maybe should live in the divisions more put HR experts in every division.

EAG Action:

- Members of the EAG will attend new employee orientation to get a first-hand idea regarding its effectiveness. The group needs to find a good example of effective orientations at other institutions.
- Members thought it would be helpful to hear from a well-run service organization regarding how to effectively manage customer-oriented issues and services.

Issue 2: Questions for HR Discussion at September EAG Meeting

The EAG members would like to speak with the HR Director and any other relevant staff to explore issues in more detail. Some specific questions were identified as follows:

- What has HR done to date to address the focus group reports?
- What are the things HR knows are not working well and what actions are being taken to improve in these areas?
- What is involved in the promotion and hiring processes, what are the factors that contribute to the time involved? What are the challenges and constraints that HR has to deal with in these procedures?
- What is the purpose of the new-employee orientation that you conduct? How is that coordinated with other orientation activities and access to information that new employees require (for example IT, time cards)?
- Do you track and evaluate processes to understand how long they take and where they get hung up?
- What tools do you think you need to help you do your jobs better?

Issue 3: Role of the EAG in Performance Assessment Improvements

It was noted that any EAG involvement needs to start now and be done by end of the calendar year in order to affect the next cycle. A subcommittee was formed including Sue Quarto, Jamie Blowers, Curtis Danner and Sandra Charles to identify an overall set of issues and approach for the EAG.