

Action Project Final Report for Developing Feedback Mechanisms and Enhancing Campus Leadership Communication

AQIP Category: 5-Leading and Communicating

Project Kickoff: October 2011

Actual completion date: December 15, 2012

Final Report: December 15, 2012

1: *What is the primary reason for closing this project?*

The initial scope of this project was intended to address a number of important goals. They can be broken down as follows:

This Action Project will **1)** develop processes for effective leadership-guided communication and **2)** recognized feedback mechanisms. **3)** It will review the communication role for all levels of leadership, **4)** develop clear expectations of leaders' communication, and **5)** provide for its evaluation. **6)** Current methods of disseminating information on decisions and collecting feedback will be studied in order to **7)** build effective two-way communication channels into the university infrastructure.

After working towards #6 (Studying current methods of disseminating information on decisions and collecting feedback), it was subsequently determined that the breadth of the project should be focused on #1, #2, and #7, reserving #3, #4, and #5 for a separate project exclusively aimed at job position issues such as job analysis, supervisor evaluations, leadership responsibilities and decision-making scope, and leadership development/training.

Since submitting the September 2012 Action Project Update, additional progress has been made on the five action items. The Action Project, with its reduced scope, is being concluded. As noted in the Update feedback under 4. Resulting Effective Practices, "The new communications tools and processes resulting from this project promise to be very effective". A list of additional accomplishments beyond the September update is provided below.

- Regarding the **NMU Policies and Procedures Online Manual** (<http://aqimac.nmu.edu/node/215>), Action Project team sought feedback on a number of specific questions. The items of interest primarily addressed the process for evaluating the effectiveness of the access changes that result, and methodology for ensuring scheduled updates to policies or procedures according to the improved process plan. As a result of focus groups with a cross-section of campus representatives, the following protocols have been established:
 - The Finance & Administration Office will manage the website, but each department will be responsible for updating their policy/procedures.
 - NMU will establish a reasonable cycle for policy reviews; the initial emphasis will be on any policies which are more than 5 years old.
 - Going forward, the review will be established by date ranges. Even if a policy does not require modification, documentation will be provided which verifies the review date.
- Demonstration of the **Online Employee Suggestion Box** (<http://www.nmu.edu/employeesuggestionbox>) has been conducted with key stakeholders across the campus. Feedback from the demonstrations resulted in the team providing with additional elements, including:
 - A way to attach files/photographs illustrating the suggestion
 - Notification to the direct leader when a suggestion is made regarding another department
 - A timeline to automatically move a suggestion along if it sits idle in someone's queue

- A chart illustrating the process flow and approval steps
- An embedded notice and training to ensure respondents are aware of the trackable nature of comment boxes permitting employees up the hierarchy to view the text.
- A process “stop” should two layers not support an idea, in order that executives not be inundated with employee suggestions that are not feasible.
- Exhibition of a unified **Employee E-mail Announcement System**. The intent of this effort is to address four key results from the communication survey audit that was conducted in 2011 (#6 above): a) to decrease the amount of e-mail sent to faculty and staff, b) to increase the salience of major campus issues and projects, c) to provide quick links to information of interest via self-selection, and d) help employees organize and prioritize the amount of communication being distributed. Feedback from the exhibition of this new tool was quite positive, with only one suggestion and two open issues identified:
 - Provide a way for “events” to automatically populate in Outlook calendars
 - Decide whether to archive the note on a daily basis, or by each separate piece
 - Assign responsibility for updating any questions and FAQ responses
- The new **Online Supervisor’s Manual** (<http://www.nmu.edu/node/212>) is expected to grow by approximately 15 topics per year until all topics are addressed. Feedback from the preview audiences indicated a need to inter-link the labor contract language (where appropriate), and to provide links to applicable policies/procedures and departmental links for further information or contacts.

Completion, or near completion of the above improvements reflect the efforts of task force members and support units. Interim evaluation has been conducted through system demonstrations and focus groups. A more formal assessment of initiative effectiveness, particularly of the Online Policy & Procedures Manual and the Online Supervisor’s Manual components, will be conducted in one year.

2: What aspects of this project would you categorize as successful?

Project Management: given the breadth of the initial project scope, the team did a good job of wading through the key issues identified through the Campus Communications Survey and targeting the most tangible and viable solutions in response to those needs without becoming distracted or overwhelmed by the vague idea encapsulated in “leaders should communicate more.”

Collaboration: this Action Project team was comprised of representatives from across the key employee stakeholder groups (UAW Local 1950, UAW Local 2178, AAUP, NMUFA, department heads, and other non-represented administrators). Having representatives from each group enabled regular updates to the target groups, with feedback returned to the team. While we regularly include bargaining team representatives on cross-functional groups, the nature of this effort demanded a careful selection of highly-skilled employees in order to exemplify effective communications. The group worked effectively with each other and generated a wide variety of creative solutions.

Academic Service Learning: in an MBA Management Communications class, students developed, conducted, and disseminated the campus communication survey; it was a great example of experiential learning in the midst of this campus initiative. Under the guidance of their professor and the Project co-chairs, the students learned how to design a useful survey instrument, addressed the challenges associated with publicity and response rates, organized in-depth focus groups to explore the survey feedback, and presented to the project team and various executive administrators. They gained valuable insight that “the act of asking a question is an intervention itself.” We would also like to clear up a reviewer misconception in the AQIP Update Report item #2 that stated, “The team may even wish to consider including a student representative.” Approximately 15 graduate students worked intensively and very closely with the task force for three months of the Project; quite a lot of student representation did occur.

Immediate Practical Impact: the solutions identified are practical and meaningful responses to the presenting issue of leadership communications on campus. The explosion of e-mail and other means of communication has increased the quantity, but not necessarily the quality of communication. This Project enabled NMU to focus tightly on the types of leadership communications that are meaningful to employees and identify solutions that address the objectives of this campus-wide effort in pragmatic and effective ways. The relatively short Project time frame from the communication survey to the tangible results enhances employees' beliefs that NMU is committed to the continuous improvement culture that AQIP generates.

3: What aspects of this project would you categorize as less than successful?

Reasonable Scope: The team must be realistic about the fact that there were elements of the initial project scope that were incised for manageability's sake. The job position description element of this work must be continued in another initiative, but that decision should not be considered a disappointment to the team members or the campus.

Reasonable Expectations: On a related note, individual expectations of effective communication from his/her leader may remain under-achieved, depending on the skill sets of the parties involved. No action project of this sort will be seen as unilaterally successful for every individual across the campus.

Representation: One group that was difficult to reach throughout the project, by virtue of their roles and work schedules, was AFSCME Local 1094. These individuals work in food service, building & grounds, and public safety, and were often unavailable during meeting times. Simultaneously, the nature of their work does not permit them to readily access computers nor spend significant time at a monitor. Some of the electronic solutions that have been developed for the vast majority of the campus are being customized for this group of employees and some of those variations are not as interactive.