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### Staff Matter(s), 36 U. Tol. L. Rev. 47 (2004)

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# STAFF MATTER(S)

*Darby Dickerson\**

## INTRODUCTION

THE most important resource any law school has is its people. Most times, you hear about the faculty, students, and top administrators.<sup>1</sup> But rarely do we talk about and praise our other staff—the hourly employees.<sup>2</sup>

Without hourly employees, most law schools would cease to function.<sup>3</sup> The facilities would be ramshackle, trash would not get collected, library books would not be updated, our paychecks and benefits would not get processed, mail would not be sent or received, and the list goes on and on. Our staff members are the people who make the law school run. Displaying leadership and appreciation in these ranks is just as important as it is with the faculty, students, senior administrators, and external constituencies.

As the Interim Dean, one of my goals is to increase the recognition given to hourly workers and, hopefully, to also increase employee morale. High employee morale leads to better customer service, which means happy students, faculty, administrators, alumni, and donors.

At a recent conference of the Association of Legal Writing Directors, Dr. Susan Baile, a senior consultant with Franklin Covey, explained that, across professions,

Gallup research has identified 12 factors that are highly correlated with a strong, vibrant work force. Organizations in which employees strongly agreed that these factors characterized their immediate work environment reported greater productivity and profitability as well as higher levels of employee retention and satisfaction.

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\* Interim University Vice President and Dean, Stetson University College of Law.

1. For example, one definition of “college” in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* is “the faculty, students, or administration of a college.” Merriam-Webster Online, *The Language Center*, at <http://www.m-w.com/home.htm>; *select* Merriam-Webster Dictionary; *search* college.

2. See Kent D. Syverud, *The Caste System and Best Practices in Legal Education*, 1 J. ALWD 12, 13 (2001) (observing that “[t]here are seven castes in most American law schools, ranging from the elite Brahmins to the dalits, or untouchables,” and that castes “include: tenured and tenure track faculty, deans, clinical faculty, law library directors, legal writing directors and faculty, and adjunct faculty. The untouchables, who are barely mentioned when we talk about what our institutions teach students, are, of course, the professional staff of law schools.”).

3. For background information, Stetson University College of Law has its main campus in Gulfport, Florida, which is adjacent to St. Petersburg. A satellite campus in downtown Tampa will open in January 2004. The College of Law is separated from its parent institution, Stetson University in DeLand, Florida, by more than 150 miles. Thus, the College of Law duplicates virtually every service that would be available on the main University campus. Specifically, the College has twenty-four administrative departments—not including faculty—and about 135 employees—again, not including faculty.

Of the 12, six are even more significant in terms of their ability to discriminate between strong and average work environments.<sup>4</sup>

The six top factors, in descending order, are:

- I know what is expected of me at work.
- I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.
- At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
- In the last 7 days, I have received praise or recognition for doing good work.
- My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
- There is someone at work who encourages my development.<sup>5</sup>

These findings support what most of us know instinctively—that communication and recognition are important to building and maintaining a strong work environment.

Stetson started to consciously improve its system of employee communication and recognition about two years ago.<sup>6</sup> This essay explains those initial efforts and some newer initiatives that are in their infancy. The programs are divided into two categories—communication and events, and awards and recognition. After discussing these two categories, this essay will then explain how one department in particular excels because of outstanding communication and regular staff recognition.

#### COMMUNICATION AND EVENTS

On the communication front, we established a newsletter called *The Advocate*. Although we have a weekly newsletter that publicizes on-campus events and student organization news, we did not have an employee newsletter. *The Advocate* filled that gap. Published monthly, *The Advocate* contains short articles about major events at the College. The newsletter also contains a “kudos” section in which supervisors, faculty, or employees can write about their own achievements or can submit information about others’ achievements. That section also can be used to say “thank you” to employees who have done an outstanding job during the past

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4. Susan Baile, *Leading within Our Programs: Creating and Sustaining a High Performance Culture 1* (unpublished conference paper, ALWD Biennial Conference, Univ. of Windsor, July 18, 2003) (copy on file with author).

5. *Id.* The other six factors, in no particular order, are:

- At work, my opinions seem to count.
- This last year, I have had opportunities to grown and learn.
- My co-workers are committed to doing quality work.
- I have a best friend at work.
- The mission/purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.
- In the last 6 months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.

*Id.*

6. At this time, Dean Gary Vause appointed an ad hoc committee of faculty, administrators, and staff to discuss and implement several of the projects described below.

month. A birthday list is a fixed feature, as is a section that contains a picture and some introductory information about new employees. Each month, one department head writes a short article about his or her department and its members. Employees have found this feature to be particularly useful; they learn about the functions of the featured department and about employees in that department.<sup>7</sup> Some months we include a crossword puzzle, and other months we have special features. For example, last Father's Day, employees could send in pictures of and memories about their fathers. We distribute the newsletter with employees' paychecks at the beginning of each month, so they know exactly when they will receive it and how they will receive it. *The Advocate* costs very little to produce, but it lets all employees know what is going on, and has helped increase both communication and morale.

Another way we have improved communications is through special programs for all staff. One program addressed diversity issues in the workplace with a speaker from our Employee Assistance Program. Another was designed to teach more people about the school and to allow them to interact with each other. We ran this session twice so that departments would not lose all employees at one time. We based the program loosely on the television show "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire," but worked in teams. Those planning the program prepared more than 100 questions about the law school and its history, faculty, employees, facility, and miscellaneous matters.<sup>8</sup> During each preliminary round, two teams went head-to-head and "buzzed in" to answer questions that we projected through a PowerPoint presentation. The two teams with the most points advanced to a final round; each team in the final received a small prize. The employees learned a lot and had a wonderful time. We still receive requests to repeat this particular program.

This summer, on a day when our school cafeteria was closed, we provided a pasta lunch for all employees, and I prepared a PowerPoint presentation that included highlights from the 2002–2003 academic year. The employees appreciated being fed and being informed. They were also excited to see their departments being mentioned or pictured and had a nice time interacting with others on campus.<sup>9</sup>

7. We discussed the order in which the departments would write and opted for the alphabetical approach.

8. The PowerPoint presentation, titled, "What Every Stetson Employee Needs to Know About Stetson," is posted on Stetson College of Law's web site, at <http://www.law.stetson.edu/bo/>.

9. Below are some of the e-mail comments I received after this luncheon and presentation:

Lunch was great and I really enjoyed the Power Point.... Thanks again for thinking of and including the hourly staff. So much of the time we are thought of as part of the office, not people. *Stuff gets done and people forget who does it.*

I would like to thank you for the wonderful lunch and presentation today. I really enjoyed hearing about all the school's current events and seeing all the staff from other departments.

Thank you very much for the staff lunch and your slide presentation. It was very informative. It contained some information I had not seen or heard before.

Thank you for the lovely staff luncheon ... and for including the picture of my office in the power point—my staff went nuts over it. They got the biggest charge and I can hear them still talking about it in the outer office.

Our goal is to continue general staff meetings twice a year. The next idea is called "Law School 101"; we plan to use a panel of law students to talk about classes and student life. So many people who work at the law school do not have an opportunity to learn what it is our students do on a day-to-day basis. All of our employees support the school's academic mission and are anxious to learn even more about it.

When I was appointed Interim Dean this summer—following the tragic death of Dean Gary Vause<sup>10</sup>—I wanted a way to meet with all employees and to thank them for their hard work and dedication. My schedule was already packed, but I did notice openings in the early mornings. So, we had breakfasts. Over a six-week period, we invited groups of departments to have "Breakfast with the Dean." We ate, we talked informally, and I spoke briefly with each group about how important their work for the school really is. Again, the feedback was great. For a series of forty-minute events, I was able to generate a lot of goodwill around campus.

We also plan off-campus gatherings. Each year we have a faculty-staff picnic at a local park. The school provides the basics, and then each person brings a covered dish. We have contests and children's activities. The picnic allows us to enjoy good food and fellowship, and to interact in a less formal environment.

Like many schools, we also have a faculty-staff holiday party in December for all to attend and enjoy. These are wonderful awards to present, because the faculty and staff can see the large number of people who have worked at the school for a substantial amount of time.

Recently, we realized that while most departments work well together, we do not always communicate as effectively as we should. We occasionally book multiple events on the same date, or fail to take advantage of opportunities to partner. After a mini-retreat with several members of the senior staff and some department heads, we have started developing a plan to further improve inter-departmental communications. One part of the solution was to start monthly Office Managers Meetings. We have twenty-four different departments at the law school; our departments are spread over a fifteen-acre campus, and some soon will be working at our new campus in downtown Tampa, which is thirty minutes away. We need the people who are primarily responsible for scheduling events and activities in each office—usually mid-level staff workers—to meet and talk about what events are being planned. We need to know what events are in the early planning stages; for events already scheduled, we need to disseminate information about which departments are needed to help. Also, if these twenty-four people get to know each other better as individuals, we firmly believe that they can help resolve misunderstandings before they develop into true problems.

Frequent and clear communication with staff is an important and ongoing job. Our programs, ranging from the employee newsletter, to staff training sessions, to our new Office Managers Meetings, have allowed us to improve communications,

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10. Dean W. Gary Vause served Stetson University College of Law for more than 28 years; he served the last four as University Vice President and Dean. He died of colon cancer on May 9, 2003, one day before our Spring 2003 commencement. Stetson Univ. College of Law, News, *Gary Vause, Stetson University College of Law Dean, Dies*, at <http://www.law.stetson.edu/Communications/news.asp?id=11> (May 9, 2003).

and, at the same time improve employee morale. The employees feel more connected to the school and appreciate the efforts the school has made to include them in more activities. Although implementing these programs does take time and effort, we have found them to be very valuable for the institution.

#### AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

Recognizing personal achievement also is a way to attract and retain a motivated and talented staff. Using a staff development fund created through our Office of College Relations and funded through our Cornerstone Campaign,<sup>11</sup> we will be awarding up to three "Employee of the Year" awards to hourly employees.<sup>12</sup> Each employee of the year will receive a plaque, a \$500 check, and a designated parking space for the entire year.<sup>13</sup> Employees will be selected by the Dean with the assistance of an advisory committee; starting next year, the advisory committee will be comprised of the prior year's award winners. Any person on campus can nominate any hourly employee using a standard nomination form. If the nomination comes from someone other than the nominee's supervisor, we will check with the supervisor and our personnel office to ensure that the employee has a stellar record. The awards will be presented at our annual holiday party in December.

At this same holiday party, we present service awards. Those who have served the school for ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, and even forty-five years,<sup>14</sup> receive an appreciation gift, which is presented by the Dean after dinner.

We recognize employees on their birthdays by sending them an individualized birthday card from the Dean. During the month of their birthday, hourly employees are invited to breakfast with our Executive Director of Business Services, who chats with them as a group. We have about two years' experience with the program, and feel that it generates tremendous goodwill.

A separate recognition program is called the Wow! Card Program.<sup>15</sup> This program is designed to reward outstanding performance and to provide positive

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11. The Cornerstone Campaign is an endowment campaign that will span 2002–2005. "The campaign's primary purpose is to strengthen and expand the intellectual life of the College of Law through enhancements to the curriculum, academic programs, faculty, students and staff." Stetson Univ. College of Law, *The Cornerstone Campaign*, at <http://www.law.stetson.edu/cornerstone/> (accessed July 25, 2003).

12. Because of the sheer number of administrative departments we have at Stetson, and because of their varying duties and functions, we decided to give three employee of the year awards. Giving three awards will allow us to recognize different types of extraordinary performance. In addition, each year, one or two administrative-level employees will receive the Dean's Award. These awards are presented in December and May at our Honors and Awards Ceremony, which is held the day before graduation. Each Dean's Award for an administrator carries a \$1,000 honorarium. Faculty and students also are eligible to receive the Dean's Award.

13. Although we have free parking, hourly employees do not have assigned parking spots. Therefore, good parking spaces that are available after lunch are highly desirable.

14. During 2002–2003, Dorothy Bishop, the Executive Assistant in the Dean's Office, celebrated her forty-fifth year working for the College of Law.

15. This program actually originated on our campus through the *Stetson Law Review*. The Editor in Chief for 2002–2003, Bridget E. Remington, implemented the program on the *Law Review* after having participated in a similar program at a former job.

reinforcement for good work. Funds also come from the staff development account.<sup>16</sup>

Because we run the program on a fiscal year, each department head is given a packet of forty-eight Wow! cards shortly before June 1.<sup>17</sup> A department head may give a Wow! card to any deserving hourly employee in any department at any time. Each month, they provide the Dean's Office with a report of employees to whom they gave Wow! cards. We then include a cumulative tally of Wow! cards awarded in our newsletter, *The Advocate*, which is described above.<sup>18</sup>

Once every three months—on or about September 1, December 1, February 1, April 1, and June 1—the Dean's Office presents awards to employees who hit the benchmarks listed below:

- 3 Wow! Cards = \$15 gift certificate, plus letter from the Dean
- 5 Wow! Cards = \$25 gift certificate, plus letter from the Dean
- 7 Wow! Cards = \$35 gift certificate, plus Wow! lapel pin, plus letter from the Dean
- 10 Wow! Cards = \$50 gift certificate, plus framed certificate of excellence
- 25 or more Wow! Cards = dinner at the Dean's house<sup>19</sup>

The awards are cumulative; thus, during a fiscal year, an employee may earn all of the prizes listed above. We will then wipe the slate clean on May 31 and start the count over.

The Wow! Card Program has been very successful in motivating hourly employees to go "above and beyond." They feel valued because they receive feedback on a more regular basis and they feel as if their good work is seen, not just by their supervisor, but also by the Dean and the campus at large.

One employee who is particularly enthusiastic about the program wrote the following:

The implementation of the WOW program was a superb idea. It is not only a motivating factor to go above and beyond the call of duty, but it is also a lot of fun. Since its inception, we have good-natured competition, and the incentives push us even harder to "out-WOW" each other.

16. An ad hoc faculty-staff committee met and voted to use funds for these purposes.

17. Wow! cards are available from Baudville, [www.baudville.com](http://www.baudville.com); they are sold in seventy-five card packets. Baudville's company theme is "Putting Applause on Paper."

The forty-eight-card supply is meant to last the entire year, and department heads will not receive a supplemental supply. Although department heads may distribute the cards as they wish in terms of time, we suggest that they award an average of four cards per month. Some administrators have an "awards ceremony" at the end of each month; others give out of the cards as someone does an outstanding job on a particular project. Department heads may provide some of their forty-eight cards to other administrators in their departments for distribution.

18. This list in *The Advocate* not only gives additional recognition to employees, but also allows them to correct any inaccuracies in our records. To correct our tally, the employee presents all of his or her Wow! cards to the Dean's Office for verification. Therefore, it is important to let employees know to keep the Wow! cards in a safe place.

19. We are discussing adding another benchmark between the last two categories.

We make it fun and verbally express “WOWs” to compliment each other. I personally feel that the WOW program offers a real positive force in making each and every one of us continue to strive for excellence.

We all look forward to our monthly WOW recognition meetings where our supervisor personally recognizes those individuals who deserved a WOW card for the month. What a morale booster!

Dale Carnegie, one of my favorite authors, said that one of the most important things in a person's life is for them to feel like what they say and do matters. Well, this certainly is the case with the WOW program, and I think it is W-O-Wonderful!<sup>20</sup>

The program also has encouraged people to praise each other's work more, and to recognize good work that was virtually ignored in the past. It's easy to recognize those who help with high-profile events, and it's easy to forget those who very quietly do an outstanding job day in and day out. Our new program has shone a light on those good performers across campus and has given them an increased sense of self-worth.

Because we distribute only a limited number of Wow! cards each month, I make an effort to write short thank-you notes to people for the various tasks they perform on campus. In late July, for example, we held a picnic for our charter class of part-time students and their families. About a dozen employees helped plan and implement this wonderful event. I dropped each a short note letting them know how much I appreciated their help on a Saturday, and how much everyone enjoyed the event.

I typically devote some time each weekend to writing these notes. Because time is often at a premium, I typically write these notes on cards called “pocket praise.”<sup>21</sup> The cards measure two by three-and-a-half inches and allow me to write two or three sentences. Given their small size, the cards are very easy to prepare. And, the employees love them. I see them tacked up on bulletin boards and taped to computer screens across campus, which shows just how much employees crave and value recognition.

#### A SUCCESSFUL DEPARTMENT

We also encourage department heads to communicate and recognize their staffs in other ways. One department that has been particularly successful at both communication and recognition is our Faculty Support Services department. Led by experienced manager Connie Evans, the department has very little turnover and very high morale, despite having one of the heaviest workloads on campus. This ten-member department works for our forty-six full-time faculty members and also assists many adjunct professors. In addition, the department serves as a liaison between faculty and students and handles many other special projects.

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20. E-mail from Sharon Gisclair, Faculty Support Services, to Darby Dickerson, Interim Dean (July 28, 2003) (copy on file with author).

21. Like the Wow! cards, pocket praise sets are available from Baudville, [www.baudville.com](http://www.baudville.com).



Although Ms. Evans does many things to communicate and motivate her staff, three examples are illustrative. First, she holds regular staff meetings during which she makes important announcements, discusses policies, and makes sure that her staff is fully informed about general school matters and matters that particularly will impact the Faculty Support Services Office.<sup>22</sup>

Second, she holds an annual staff appreciation breakfast. One part of that breakfast involves each staff member saying something nice about another staff member. This way, the positive reinforcement comes not only from the top down, but also from peers.

Third, she holds an annual, full-day retreat. At the retreat, she shares the annual report that she submits to her direct supervisor, the Associate Dean. She also discusses whether the prior year's goals were met, and works with her staff to set new goals. She discusses policies and allows her staff to put other items on the agenda. She brings in an outside motivational speaker, and gives each person a small gift as a token of her appreciation. She also speaks with people with whom she works, such as office supply vendors, to see whether they might have a small giveaway item for each person. She displays all of the books, papers, and articles that professors have produced during the year with the office's help, and highlights any dedications to the members of the office that professors include in those works.

She spends a great deal of time focusing on each person and talking about how each person contributes to the office. She also invites others to chime in with words of praise. After discussing each individual, she spends time explaining to her staff how the department helps the school to function and meet its goals. Her staff members always leave these meetings feeling greatly appreciated, rejuvenated, and ready to tackle another school year with great enthusiasm.

Simply put, this department is a wonderful example of how treating staff members with respect, how valuing their performance, and how communicating clearly and regularly will lead to topnotch results.

#### CONCLUSION

Staff matter. Be sure, as Dean, to show them just how much they matter to the well being of the law school. Communicate clearly and frequently, and through outlets that will actually reach the hourly staff. Recognize the staff for their achievements, and for their every day good work. Without an experienced, motivated staff, your job will be more difficult, and the student's academic experience will not be nearly as positive.

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22. We hold administrator meetings twice a month. At these meetings, people make announcements about upcoming events and issues, discuss upcoming events, and share thoughts on various issues. Administrators are urged to share the non-confidential announcements from these meetings with their staff.