

Session 8

Cake, Bears, & singing- or Keeping professional staff morale positive in challenging work environments- one manager's reflections.

Aileen Alexander

ATEM

The main work of the Academic Governance Unit at RMIT University focuses on discipline, exclusions, appeals and high risk complaints. This team comprises of seven amazing people who bring an exceptional level of expertise, empathy and professionalism to circumstances which deal with student life when things go wrong.

The team are responsible for responding to high risk, complex and at times contentious matters that cross all levels of the organisation and external bodies such as the Victorian Human Rights and Equal opportunity commission, Ombudsman Victoria, and the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal. The work is challenging and often involves dealing with distressed on and offshore students at the pointy end of discipline action, exclusion due to unsatisfactory academic progress, and the final stage of a tiered complaint process.

The cycle is relentless for the team with little “down time”, and limited ability to control the flow of work requiring adherence to strict deadlines. The team can experience highs and lows throughout a normal day, successful disentangling of challenging issues resulting in a positive outcome or, sadly, written and verbal abuse when things don't quite go as the complainant anticipated.

As the manager of the Academic Governance Unit the challenge of leadership is to provide a working environment and culture that is safe, supportive and fun while allowing professional expertise to flourish and develop.

This presentation will reflect on this leadership challenge and share experiences and reflections on what makes this team working environment in the Academic Registrars Group particularly coherent and such a close knit group of colleagues.

Leadership starts at the top and we are fortunate to have a Leader in the role of Academic Registrar that models Parabolic Leadership in her daily interactions with staff.

This paper will explore the beginning implementation of this model with the team, share models of practice in the context working with high performing people, and propose that sometimes cake, singing, bears and a compassionate set of ears are sometimes all the tools a manager needs to best support staff in a demanding university work environment.

Presenters Biography

Aileen Alexander has over 23 years experience in both clinical services provision and as a public Health Administrator, in a range of settings including Acute and Sub acute Health, psychiatry community and Emergency critical care, Department of Human Services and most recently in the Tertiary Education Sector.

Aileen's management experience has been in a range of Senior Executive roles, as the Executive Director of Allied Health in Psychiatric Services, and most recently in the role of General Manager prior to her career change to immerse herself fully in the management of staff in the Higher Education sector.

Aileen undertook to build on her clinical expertise by undertaking a Masters of Business Leadership and was became interested in University administration after her experience as a sessional lecturer as an industry expert focussing on Organisational Behaviour and Leadership.

Through her experience in the health sectors where demands for services usually outstrips the services available, Aileen was responsible for the management of many different professional work teams including medical, nursing and allied health staff and most recently the leadership of a team of professional staff.

Aileen was an active member in the Australian College of Health Services Executives and is looking forward to making a similar contribution to the work of the Association for Tertiary Education Management in the future.