

## **From Administrivia to Engagement: Lessons in Participative Management and Employee Satisfaction at the ARC Centre of Excellence for Climate System Science**

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Administrivia. Senseless bureaucracy. Confounding paperwork. Holding the purse strings. Running errands for our academic colleagues. Do these tasks and descriptions accurately sum up the work of professional staff? Or do they demean and undervalue the important contributions we make?

There is a growing body of literature in Australia and overseas (by authors such as Szekeres, Conway, Whitchurch and Graham) which points to the evolution of the role and status of professional staff in universities. Professional staff are a large and disparate group and it could be argued that compared to their academic colleagues, there isn't the same established culture of collaboration and interaction across – or even within – institutions. Nor is there a single, universal management philosophy applicable to professional staff in the same way as the established collegiate management approach that has traditionally been the norm for academics (White, Carvalho and Riordan, 2011. Birnbaum, 2000. Bessant, 2002). Managers of professional staff are increasingly exposed to corporate styles of management (Szekeres 2006), yet they operate in a broader environment where collegiate relationships are still the overarching paradigm.

For this reason the responsibility for determining an approach to management and staff development often falls on to the local manager or leader – who may or may not have received formal management training due to large variations in what opportunities different institutions offer their professional staff. In turn, the individual's management and leadership style (somewhere on a spectrum from autocratic to laissez faire) will often be the key determinant of employees' job satisfaction as well as the key to their access to career development opportunities. There is a body of management literature that suggests the best outcomes are achieved through participative management. Furthermore participative management approaches are a comfortable fit within the university culture alongside the academic collegiate approach to management.

In early 2012 the professional staff team at the Centre of Excellence for Climate System Science took a gamble; they started planning their own off-campus afternoon retreat to build teamwork and plan for the year ahead. The retreat soon grew to include counterparts from two other Centres of Excellence based at UNSW due to the similarities of their working environments. By giving all professional staff in those organisations an opportunity to come together, interact and share ideas it was hoped networks could be developed and common solutions could be found to some of the challenges faced by complex, multi-institutional research organisations. There was interest also from the

Director of the UNSW Grants Management Office and the University's Senior Research Development Manager who attended the workshop, praised the initiative and offered support for future workshops.

The day's agenda provided opportunities for junior and senior staff of the three centres to interact as equals and for all voices and opinions to be heard. It enabled those people to have a say in the management and direction of their centres. The workshop afforded professional staff the rare privilege of an afternoon away from the office to focus and reflect on their career development and empowerment. Most importantly it was an interactive workshop created by and run for professional staff. The workshop was an excellent example of participative management in action.

In their presentation, we will provide a brief literature review on the topic and philosophy of participative management, particularly how it applies to the higher education context. They will then illustrate principles of participative management with the case study of the combined UNSW Centres of Excellence Professional Staff Workshop as well as reflections from the successful day-to-day running of a research centre that crosses five universities and has a multi-million dollar budget but a much smaller admin team than other similar-sized organisations. The presentation will include perspectives from both a manager and team member's personal experiences of participative management compared to other leadership styles.

Finally, we will attempt to provide transferable skills, ideas and examples to other managers and team members who wish to explore the benefits of adopting participative management and intra-institutional collaborative opportunities in their units, schools or centres.