

# HR as a Key Player in Organizational Change

*How HR Is Helping Drive Excellence at Florida International University*

By Trudy Fernandez

Florida International University (FIU) has been laser focused on implementing an aggressive strategic plan called *FIUBeyondPossible2020*, with the goals of ensuring student success, building preeminent programs, achieving the Carnegie Very High Research designation and increasing the institution's financial base and efficiency.

During this time of rapid growth and organizational change, FIU's division of human resources has been at the helm of several initiatives driving the "people side" of numerous transformations to position FIU to succeed in meeting its goals.

## Leading Change

HR is providing several strategies, tools and programs that are helping FIU strengthen its infrastructure and engage its highly diverse faculty and staff in meaningful ways. These HR-led initiatives include a focus on service excellence, the Leadership Education Advancement Program, the Performance Excellence Process, university relations initiatives, and a classification and compensation redesign.

## Service Excellence

One of the strategies for meeting the goals of the university's *FIUBeyondPossible2020* plan was to develop a consistent "brand" of service excellence across the campus, and human resources was charged with leading this effort. FIU leadership established a service excellence task force in 2014. The task force, made up of 70 staff, faculty, students, administrators and leaders representing their respective business units or special interest groups, were charged with addressing five key goals: understanding the customer, developing service standards, telling our service story, developing training and rewards, and fostering innovation and solutions.

Over a six-month period, the task force used focus groups, survey data, interviews and benchmarking to understand

what students and other customers most valued in their interactions with FIU. Monthly meetings were held to track progress, assign next steps and encourage dialogue and collaboration. The five work streams emanating from the goals accomplished the following:

- Voice of the Customer – analyzed data, reported results, identified and prioritized trends to be addressed
- Core FIU Standards – focused on determining methodology, collected all existing standards, drafted new standards and made final recommendations
- Communication – developed communication plan/timeline, developed key messages, identified audiences, drafted new brand, developed marketing strategy and ongoing reinforcement communication
- Training and Rewards – developed service excellence training strategy and e-learning for existing and new hires, identified alignment opportunities such as with the annual performance review instrument to redefine service excellence competency and ratings, identified and made recommendations to enhance rewards and recognition strategy
- Solutions – served as the core leadership triage with quick-response team to find solutions to complex problems

A dedicated SharePoint site was established to provide a central and accessible process for all documents and data. Project management plans tracked assignments, status and interdependencies and provided high visibility and accountability.

Service excellence was incorporated into the FIU strategic plan and communicated by the president and provost in town hall meetings as a focus priority. In just three months, more than 900 employees were trained around

service excellence. To expand the reach of the program, 46 faculty and staff participated in train-the-trainer workshops, equipping them to facilitate the service excellence workshops.

Subsequently, more than 2,000 additional employees have been trained, and workshops are offered monthly for new hires. Facilitators receive a workbook, a leader's guide, a PowerPoint with video vignettes, and an FIU service excellence standards handout. Program graduates are awarded a certificate of completion and three hours of professional development credit. For employees who work non-traditional schedules or who are based remotely, service excellence e-learning programs are offered.

### ***Leadership Education Advancement Program***

The Leadership Education Advancement Program (LEAP) is an eight-week program designed to provide leaders with critical knowledge and skills needed to manage with excellence. The program is structured into four categories — institutional knowledge, managing self and managing others, workforce management and operational excellence — and concludes with a capstone project in which participants develop and present proposals for a solution or project that resolves an existing challenge or offers an innovative idea for FIU. A panel of university senior leaders and executives reviews the proposals and makes recommendations for further development and/or implementation.

Since LEAP began in 2011, 550 of FIU's leaders have graduated from the program. LEAP graduates represent almost every business unit at FIU. Combined, they manage more than 1,650 direct reports (19 percent of FIU's total workforce). To date, the launch of LEAP has generated the successful implementation of 10 projects on topics ranging from improving FIU parking to implementation of an HRIS ticketing system. Out of 550 graduates, 81 percent are still employed at FIU. A similar population over the same period at FIU would have yielded a retention rate of 65-70 percent. And while participation in LEAP does not guarantee a promotion or a raise, 106 (20 percent) LEAP graduates were promoted after their participation in the program.

### ***Performance Excellence***

Alignment of individual performance goals and work with strategic priorities is a critical component of culture change. The Performance Excellence Process (PEP) at

FIU has evolved from a paper-based process to a fully online system that links the performance of individuals to the goals and values of the university. HR facilitated the transformation from managers focusing mostly on how to complete the PEP document to them learning to have meaningful conversations with employees about performance and, most importantly, how to establish goals and set expectations for the performance period. PEP is a key dependency for the transformation to a pay-for-performance compensation philosophy, as PEP ratings are used as a basis for merit increases, bonuses and promotional opportunities.

To roll out the new performance evaluation process, HR hosted one-hour webinars during which we shared the new features and outlined the process (821 individuals attended). PEP completions have increased from a 60-65 percent completion rate in 2012 to a 90+ percent completion rate today.

### ***University Relations Initiatives***

At FIU, taking the time to praise and recognize our workforce is at the heart of what we do. To that end, the following are just a few ways HR has been able to galvanize the university community by strengthening and building a culture of recognition and appreciation:

- Recognition – The annual FIU Service and Recognition Program has been enhanced to align with our strategic goals. As an example, two new award categories have been added in recent years to reflect our commitment to service excellence and safety and loss prevention. In addition to this recognition program, we host a week-long series of events to recognize our student employees, culminating with the Student Employee of the Year awards ceremony.
- Compassion – The Tender Loving Care Brigade, established by FIU's president, provides immediate support to faculty and staff experiencing unexpected hardships. Assistance provided varies and can range from access to FIU's internal food bank to financial assistance, referral to our internal units for ongoing support (such as medical, legal or emotional support), or simply an expression of condolences or well wishes.
- Appreciation – The university hosts several appreciation events throughout the year for faculty and staff, including a family picnic in the spring,

homecoming activities, diversity week activities and the president's holiday celebration. These events provide an opportunity for faculty and staff across the university to come together in celebration of our accomplishments. Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work Day also provides the FIU workforce with an opportunity to expose their children to higher education while engaging them in organized activities that highlight our Worlds Ahead research programs and services. Recognizing the value and desire of our retirees to help advance our university's mission, we have established the FIU Retiree Association to find meaningful ways to engage them with our university community. In addition to retirement announcements and formal recognition at social events to thank them for their contributions, we introduced the inaugural FIU Ambassador Award in the fall of 2016. This award is presented during the annual FIU retiree reunion to a retiree for his or her commitment of time and service to others on a volunteer basis.

### ***Classification and Compensation Redesign***

By overhauling FIU's classification and compensation structure, HR is able to better provide FIU leadership with relevant data to formulate plans by which to attract and retain the talent needed in order for the university to accomplish its goals. In taking the bold step of evaluating every position to determine accuracy in content, appropriate titling based on the nature of the work and alignment with the general market of relevant peers, the classification and compensation redesign project team collaborated with more than 300 subject matter experts and participants throughout the university, including HR graduate students. Every college, department and organizational unit participated in the development of the improved job classification structure and new "career ladders." The new classification structure is now in alignment with FIU's strategic plan.

Examples of new capabilities include:

- The ability to compare similar jobs within the organization more easily, providing internal equity.
- The ability to quickly and efficiently compare the university's jobs to the labor market, providing realistic external competitive pricing.
- Tools to support career development (employees and managers can now explore FIU's online job specifications and envision career paths at FIU).

Similar to the work streams created for the service excellence initiative, position description review teams were created for each unit across the university. Approximately 2,800 positions were reviewed; four career groups were created; 22 job families and 134 sub-families were established; 847 job titles were developed and/or updated; and 300 administrators/faculty/staff/students participated.

### **An Employer of Choice**

As a result of FIU's organizational transformation, the university is now recognized as an employer of choice. FIU earned national recognition from *Forbes* in 2015 and again in 2016 when the university was ranked second in the state of Florida, and 64th (2015) and 34th (2016) nationally on the list of "America's Best Employers" across all industries in both the public and private sectors. In 2016, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* elevated FIU to Honor Roll status on its "Great Colleges to Work For" list.

These accolades do not happen in a vacuum or overnight, but rather are a testament to the workplace culture that has been built in collaboration with faculty, staff and students.

### **HR as Strategist**

As higher ed continues to navigate financial challenges, HR professionals have an opportunity to present optimal solutions that impact the bottom line while allowing for necessary growth in areas to better serve students and engage the workforce. Finding meaningful ways to develop and engage a diverse workforce to drive performance (which in turn drives excellence) requires a multi-pronged approach, and at FIU that approach includes innovative thinking, collaboration and cross-functional partnerships, institution-wide buy-in and the professional knowledge and strength of HR leadership. 

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