

Building HR Competencies (and Solving Problems) Through Group Think

In 2015, the University of Wisconsin System implemented its own human resources function, separate from the State of Wisconsin. This new autonomous way of doing HR changed a number of dynamics and gave the university the opportunity to rethink a whole range of policies and procedures and how it could best administer them. Out of this HR redesign was born the HR Communities of Practice office. Located at UW-Madison, the office serves to foster the development of learning communities through which HR practitioners can build their knowledge, skills and abilities to enhance their work in service to the campus community.

We spoke with Harry Webne-Behrman, interim director of this new office, to learn more about the communities of practice concept and how the model is being applied at UW-Madison.

Q: Can you start by explaining the communities of practice concept and the role of the Communities of Practice office?

A: Communities of Practice (CoPs) have become important aspects of the UW-Madison learning terrain over the past decade, thriving in a number of areas. CoPs within UW-Madison human resources have formed around various HR-related competencies, challenges and needs and enable individuals to share resources and knowledge with an eye toward building those competencies, finding solutions to those challenges and addressing those needs. Some CoPs have emerged organically from members of the HR community itself, while others have been catalyzed and organized by the new CoP office. We are evolving to an HR business partner/consultative model at UW-Madison, and we have several hundred HR people distributed across colleges, divisions and departments as well as centrally located within the office of human resources. The CoPs help ensure a common base of knowledge, especially around our identified facilitative competencies — managing change, collaboration, ethics and integrity, execution and problem solving.

The HR communities of practice office fosters essential knowledge sharing and helps facilitate the HR cultural transformation we're embarking upon, with the goal of effective partnerships and a sustainable, competency-based learning program for a diverse campus HR community. The CoPs are largely peer-organized and peer-led, but our office (which consists of three FTEs) supports these groups by coordinating training, providing resources and creating learning pathways.

Q: What was the impetus for implementing the CoP model at UW-Madison?

A: The university's traditional human resources model was very much rooted in transactional functions and central control of those functions. When we were granted autonomy from the state of Wisconsin, we had the opportunity to reevaluate how we were "doing" HR. Shared governance is highly valued at UW-Madison — not just for faculty but also for staff — so we made a commitment to approach the HR function in a way that is much more in partnership with the campus community. However, we quickly realized that there had never been

an expectation that was consistently applied in hiring or training HR people on campus to behave in that way. There was no learning program in place for our HR people that supported delegation of authority and the whole notion of "partnership" — not only for how the HR folks in the various colleges might interact with their customers, but also how central HR interacts with HR staff across campus. So we wanted to create a program that would nurture the development of those business partner/consultative skills, and do so in a way that was contextually relevant and specific to what the campus needed.

We also wanted a program that would foster competency-based learning pathways for all HR professionals throughout their careers. The CoP model is beneficial because it allows individuals to identify the competencies that they see as priorities for themselves and then build up their skill sets in those areas.

Q: How are the various CoPs formed and what groups are currently in place?

A: In a few cases they've come into being through grassroots efforts, when HR folks on campus have identified a competency gap and have come together to share resources and learn as a group. In those instances, the CoP office serves as a resource and a catalyst. In other cases, central HR leads the effort. For example, we recently implemented electronic timekeeping campus-wide, and that's required a big culture shift, especially for faculty. So central HR formed an "e-time" working group so that HR staff who were charged with implementing and facilitating this transition could learn from one another about the strategies for success (some of which are technical, some of which are social) and get coaching on how to manage the change.

There are currently several CoPs on campus, with about 200 individuals participating in one or more. The HR Design/Academic Units CoP is currently looking at how we're implementing the new HR system in the various colleges. Within that CoP, there are several working groups. One working group is looking at how we can better welcome new HR staff and has created an onboarding program, which the CoP office is now putting into place. Another working group is focused on HR-related concerns around the university's animal research technicians (titles, compensation pathways, hazardous pay, wide pay ranges). Other CoPs have formed around payroll and benefits,

social justice issues, global professionals and more. Most CoPs are fluid and organic — some groups disband after addressing concerns, some fold into other groups, and some are long-term.

Q: What kinds of learning events and opportunities are available to these groups?

A: The HR Communities of Practice office facilitates many different kinds of learning for the CoPs. We've hosted shared viewing of some of CUPA-HR's webinars. We hosted a day-long conference for the first time for our HR folks this past December and had more than 250 attendees. We're currently developing a pilot learning cohort that will launch in early 2017. The cohort will consist of 12-18 people that will work together to develop their HR competencies in partnership with peer mentors and the CoP office. We're developing attributes of each competency at "developing," "cultivating fluency" and "mastering" levels. This pilot will be our first foray into putting that learning and assessment into practice.

During the spring 2017 semester we'll be doing a brown-bag series on different HR topics. We also have a CoP website (www.ohr.wisc.edu/cop), where we've been organizing learning resources, a central calendar of HR-related campus events and key resources for new HR professionals. And we're currently exploring how we might be able to build a virtual community to enable our CoPs to share knowledge and resources that way.

Q: What benefits and outcomes have you seen since implementing the communities of practice model?


A: We're seeing a whole different attitude and mindset and a spirit of collaboration emerging among our HR staff across campus. Many of our HR people are realizing that the CoP model and our office is an incredibly beneficial resource to them in supporting their aspirations about how they really want to do HR here. Our office is becoming a trusted partner to our HR folks as they're coming to realize that we can help them manage processes and reach executable outcomes. The concept of learning and development is also gaining new status on campus with our HR staff — they see that they can and should be learning

in order to do their jobs to the best of their abilities. Once several of our learning initiatives launch over the next few months, I'm expecting to see some more tangible results.

Q: What challenges have you encountered?

A: The whole idea of having competencies on which people will be assessed has presented challenges and has elicited a variety of reactions. Some people are excited about it because they want to learn and want to be able to demonstrate that learning and have accountability for it, but others have some anxiety around it. And our emphasis on interpersonal skills and HR's transformation into a consultative partnership model — some people take to that idea easily, others not so much. Some people are of the mindset that they just need to perform their tasks, not make mistakes and just get the job done, and that they don't really need all these other skills. But what these individuals fail to take into account is that if they're problem solving and collaborating and communicating really well, that's going to have a profound impact on the error rate. And if you create relationships with people who can honestly say to you "I don't know how to do this," then you aren't going to just be reacting when they do it incorrectly, you're going to be proactive and help them get it right the first time. Also, people are just so busy with all the "have-tos" that many feel like they just don't have time to think about learning.

Q: Would you say the communities of practice model is easily replicable for other HR organizations?

A: Absolutely. The concept is pretty straightforward, the cost is minimal and the benefits of HR folks coming together as peers to learn and expand their skill sets and competencies are immeasurable. 

*If you'd like to learn more about University of Wisconsin-Madison's HR Communities of Practice, contact **Harry Webne-Behrman** at harry.webnebehrman@wisc.edu. Or, if you're attending the CUPA-HR Spring Conference March 26-28 in St. Louis, Missouri, plan to attend Webne-Behrman's session "It Starts With Trust: Developing the HR Communities of Practice Office at UW-Madison."*