The Research Administrator as Servant-Leader. (Commentary).

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Introduction

Research administrators are charged with the task of supporting the research enterprise. We provide many services that allow our researchers to focus more fully on their work, including the guidance that helps to ensure that rules and regulations are met.

We serve and we lead! This may seem contradictory, yet there can in fact be a natural progression from servant to leader. By striving first to serve, and then to lead, we can earn the trust of our researchers. We often hear disparaging remarks about "the administration" and "bureaucracy." Most of us will admit that some of these remarks are well-founded, even when they are aimed at us. Sometimes rules and regulations dictate what we do, and rules and regulations many times seem to have been created without considering the perspective of the people who must follow them.

Of course research administrators can say that it is our job to lead, ensure that rules are followed, and see that the integrity of our institution is upheld. But we can better accomplish that by serving first, teaching well, and leading in such a manner that sometimes people aren't even aware that they are being led.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow developed a classic theory of human motivation that focused upon the strength and adequate fulfillment of certain needs. He proposed a hierarchy of needs, suggesting that a person's behavior is motivated by his or her most basic need at a given moment. According to Maslow's theory understanding a little about human motivation can help us to provide better service. The more we know the needs of our researchers and can discern their strongest need of the moment, the better we can serve them.

Maslow's theory contends that, in the beginning, the physiological needs have the highest priority: air, water, food, shelter, and other basic needs. If these needs are not fulfilled, the person finds difficulty focusing on any other needs. A classic example of Maslow's theory suggests that a person who is hungry or homeless will most likely be consumed by that basic need and will not be able to think about a higher goal, such as a fulfilling career, until that basic need is at least partially satisfied. Similarly, a researcher who is frantically trying to meet a proposal deadline is most likely thinking only of finishing something on time, the most pressing need at that moment. He or she is probably not thinking about what a poorly written proposal will do for the reputation of the researcher or even the institution. Consequently, it is important for research administrators to know what assistance our researchers need from us (in this case, proper assistance to prepare a good proposal) and to provide as much of that service as possible.

The next needs to emerge are the safety needs. Once the basic survival needs are met, humans seek stability in a chaotic world. Consider the world of research: deadlines, multiple agency
formats, electronic submission, award terms, and conditions. All are very chaotic, and there are many more examples. As research administrators, we contribute to the security of our researchers and our institutions by helping to ensure that rules and regulations are followed. We are the ones charged with knowing the rules and we must use that knowledge to guide our researchers to protect both them and our institutions.

Having sufficiently satisfied the physiological needs and safety needs, a person's social or affiliation needs may then become more dominant. Maslow believed that once their physiological and safety needs have been somewhat satisfied, people will begin to desire to belong to a group and develop meaningful relationships. In the research realm, good working relationships or even friendships can develop once a researcher receives good service from a research administrator. When the researcher does not need to focus on meeting a basic need, he or she is freed to move to a higher level, where interactions are usually less stressful and consequently more pleasant. A researcher who realizes that the administrator is part of the team, that we are "in this thing together," is more likely to react positively to other issues. A team environment is an implementation of Maslow's need for affiliation, being part of a group, and it can also help the researcher understand that the research administrator cares about more than just adhering to rules.

After the feelings of belongingness and establishment of relationships are addressed, Maslow believed that people could then feel the need for esteem, in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. While each researcher has his or her own reason for entering the field, most take great pride in achieving the respect of their colleagues, institutions, and others. They are generally high achievers and value success. We can help speed the process of fulfilling their esteem needs by allowing them more time to focus on their research, making sure that their proposals meet the requirements of the sponsor and seeing that their awards are managed well.

Self-actualization needs become more pronounced when all of the other needs are at least partially satisfied. People can focus on fulfilling their highest potential, since they do not have to concentrate on the other human needs. As Maslow said, "What a man can be, he must be" (Hersey et al., 1996, p. 42). But human beings generally are not capable of thinking about such lofty goals if they are hungry, or do not feel safe, or have another great need. When our attention to the needs of our researchers helps them to progress through Maslow's hierarchy and achieve their potential, we can also help them to bring esteem to our institution. The success of our researchers can, in fact, help us progress in our own search for esteem and self-actualization. We can increase our reputations, earn respect and trust from our institutions and colleagues, and become "what we must be." The entire team can grow and achieve success.

And so we learn to serve our researchers better and grow ourselves in the process. But we are also expected to provide leadership. How do we do that while focusing on providing service?

First to Serve

As research administrators, we help to fulfill the needs of others by providing needed services. While it may be argued that the very nature of providing service places a person in a subservient role, it can place us in a very good position to be leaders. It seems contradictory, yet there can be a natural progression from servant to leader.
Those who lead first, who serve only as an afterthought, or maybe even do not serve at all, generally are motivated by thoughts of power or personal success. For them, helping others is not a priority, and that is usually apparent to others. Such people often appear to care more about following the rules and showing authority than helping others to achieve their potential. This approach frustrates the people who must follow them and creates a poor or possibly hostile working environment. The leaders are not trusted, since the followers do not believe that their best interests are being considered.

Truly serving our researchers does not imply that we must ignore the rules. In fact, in our profession, one of the greatest services we can provide is assistance in interpreting and following the rules and regulations given to us by those who fund research. We can still earn the trust of our researchers, even when we must apply the rules, by showing a genuine concern for them and making their lives easier whenever it is within our power to do so. Once trust is established, researchers are less likely to perceive research administrators as purely bureaucratic. When we must say, "No," and researchers are not happy with the decision, they will understand that we care about their needs and have tried our best.

But just how can we ensure that our service is helping to meet the needs of our researchers? And how can we develop their trust enough to allow us to lead them?

In a lecture presented at the University of Notre Dame in October, 1996, Robert J. Doyle recounts a letter he received from John F. Donnelly, Sr. Donnelly was very enthusiastic about a book he had just read entitled Bernard Lonergan's Philosophy of God. While the book dealt with religious and philosophical themes, Donnelly felt that Lonergan's imperatives could be applied to business as well. He thought that leaders could gain the trust of people by following these imperatives:

Be attentive
Be intelligent
Be reasonable
Be responsible
Be loving

Develop, and, if necessary, change. (Doyle, 1997, p. 445)

Like Donnelly, research administrators can also apply these imperatives at work. While Maslow's hierarchy of needs helps us to understand the stages that people move through while trying to satisfy human needs, Lonergan's imperatives provide guidance on how to serve while helping people meet their needs.

The first imperative, be attentive, is one that many administrators ignore. We need to be
observant, listen, and pay attention to the needs of those we serve. How often is an accounting system, for example, chosen without seeking the input of those who will use it? Asking questions, seeking advice, and using the knowledge gained to the extent that it is possible will help to show our researchers that we, and our institutions, do in fact value them. We should not presume to know what others need without first asking them. Even explaining why something cannot be done, instead of simply saying, "No," can also go a long way in showing attention to the needs of others.

Visiting researchers in their laboratory is another way of being attentive. People generally feel more comfortable in their own territory, and this relaxed state can allow for more effective communication. Showing a genuine interest in their work also communicates that one is looking at the overall picture, not just the administrative details. It also shows the researcher that the administration can be interested in the work being done, not just in the dollars that it brings to the institution.

Lonergan's second imperative suggests that we be intelligent. We need to show our researchers that we learn and apply knowledge. Gathering all of the information we can through the many avenues of professional development will help administrators to become more knowledgeable about the profession. Learning about the culture, policies, and procedures of our institutions is equally important. The more one knows, the more one can share, and the more service one can provide. In this era of rapid and constant change, up-to-date knowledge is more valuable, and generally more appreciated, than ever.

Lonergan also advises being reasonable, another trait that is important in the field of research administration. Using the knowledge gained from visits with researchers is one way to show thought and reason. Knowing their concerns and issues can help in communications with sponsors as well as others within one's institution. And better communication leads to more informed decisions that are better for everyone. We need to be moderate in our decisions and fair to everyone involved, while following the dictates of sound thinking.

The fifth imperative, be responsible, is a trait that most research administrators internalize early on in their careers. After all, we are entrusted with much responsibility by and for our institutions. Often we must make certain that our institutions and researchers avoid potential problems. We also need to remember our responsibilities to our researchers, within the context of rules and requirements. We should strive to remember that our researchers are the reason we are employed, and that helping them to use their funding and perform their research responsibly should be our primary goal.

The sixth imperative, be loving, may seem a little "warm and fuzzy" for the realm of research but still applies to our work. Perhaps it is easier to think of this imperative in terms of being kind. Showing courtesy and concern for another person usually elicits a positive response and may set the tone for future interactions. In a time when rudeness is common and many people show little consideration for others, being kind and treating someone with respect can make a huge impression. A kind person, after all, is more likely to be trusted than someone who is not kind.

Lonergan's final imperative emphasizes the need to develop and, if necessary, change.
Policies and procedures that were developed years ago may no longer fit, or even be necessary, yet sometimes we cling to them just because they have always been there. Where new information or technology is available, changes should be made. In fact, adopting new procedures often improves the quality of work and results in better compliance.

We need constantly to be aware that there may be better and easier ways to accomplish our goals. Of course, we should not embrace change for the sake of change or technology for the sake of having new technology. Nor should we make changes without considering all of the potential consequences. We should, however, always remain open to the possibility that better ways to do things may exist, and we should implement them whenever we can. Being responsive to the changing needs of our researchers is just one more way to gain respect and trust in our services.

Then to Lead... and Serve

Robert Greenleaf begins his book Servant Leadership by relating a story by Herman Hesse. In Journey to the East, a group of men embark upon a sponsored journey. They are accompanied by Leo, who is sent by the group that sponsored the journey. He travels as a servant who handles the mundane chores along the way and also provides comfort to the travelers with his spirit and song. When Leo disappears along the way, the men fall into chaos and eventually abandon their journey, not necessarily realizing why the effort failed. Many years later, the narrator of the story again meets Leo and discovers that Leo was not actually a servant, but was in fact a leader. Leo was the leader of the group that sponsored the journey and in his own subtle way also led the journey. Hence its collapse when he left the travelers; they could not continue without him. Leo, who took such great pains to serve others faithfully, had in fact been leading them all along!

Like Leo, we too are sometimes viewed as "servants." We provide many of the administrative services that our researchers need. We are liaisons with sponsoring agencies, we look up information, and at times we perform clerical duties or technical support. We do whatever it takes to get a proposal out the door or ensure that an award is managed properly. If we, like Leo, disappeared, what would happen to our researchers?

Some might celebrate; others would miss the services we provide for them. But it certainly would not be long before the research enterprise would fall into chaos and perhaps be threatened. The researchers would simply not have the time, desire, or even the skills to handle all of the administrative burdens without assistance. They would rather focus on what they do best: research. Without research administrators to serve and lead them, our researchers might ignore the administrative issues, resulting in the lost trust of the sponsors and in sanctions that might limit or even shut down the research enterprise.

Conclusion

In trying to meet the needs of all of our research partners, we must think carefully about what those needs are at any given time, and make wise, carefully thought out decisions. Our researchers need guidance with policies and procedures, but they need our concern and encouragement, too. Once we have demonstrated our commitment to them and have earned...
their trust, they will be more inclined to follow our lead. By serving first, our leadership abilities will be more trusted. Greenleaf stated that people “will more freely respond to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted servants” (Greenleaf, 1991,p. 15). If we want to lead our researchers along the right path, we should also serve them along the way.

We are obligated to be good stewards of funding provided for research. In keeping with that obligation, we must provide the service our researchers need so they are free to focus on the work they have been funded to do. We need to form a true partnership, one based on concern for the needs of all partners, and one that will create the maximum benefits for all partners.

References


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