

Illinois Wesleyan University

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T.W.I.S.T.: Trust the Wisdom In Student Teams

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T.W.I.S.T.

Trust the Wisdom In Student Teams

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Initial Considerations

Before you decide if a “Student Team” might be a good choice to meet your needs, there are several things to consider - both from a supervisory perspective and from that of the job’s function itself.

Students are Temporary Employees

The simple, yet sheer power of “Student Teams” lies in the fact that your team members regularly turn over. This provides both negative and positive aspects. On the negative side, you lose those fabulous staff members just when you tend to become dependent upon them. Conversely, you continually acquire new-blood and with it, new ideas, new strengths and the opportunity to progressively steer your team to meet those ever-changing technology needs. Although this may make the job of supervising these teams necessarily more watchful, the opportunities, in my experience, far outweigh the negatives.

Strategies for Vesting

Because students are temporary employees, success in getting them to become vested in their job requires a different approach. Let’s think about what we know about this group of staff: a) they are in a new environment (away from home), b) most are on a 4-year plan/vision and c) college represents a transition stage for them. Intentionally and strategically place yourself and this job as a bridge between two identifiable points: child/adult and student/professional. To encourage vesting, as an employer, you must help each student believe that the skills they learn and develop in this job will increase their potential for success in their professional life by providing them with experience and solid, professional references. Students vest when there is something they perceive to be important (or enjoyable) in it for them. Learn them. Convince them.

Appropriate Jobs

What jobs can/should a student perform? Anyone can sit in an office and respond to commands (e.g.

make 2 copies, take this to so-and-so, etc.). However, I prefer to push the limits of what jobs are considered student-appropriate. How do you determine whether a job is student appropriate or not? Consider how long it would take for a particular skill (or skill set) to be learned. Evaluate whether written/verbal guidance can result in tasks being performed appropriately? If those things can begin to happen in a semester or less, that job might be a successful candidate for a student-solution.

Management for Students

Why even look at students? How do you manage them? They are so individual. What if I can’t find the same talent consistently? Students are inquisitive, thirsty to learn and be challenged, and love to be rewarded when successful. Students in teams I manage have come up with solutions to problems our technical staff just did not have time to develop. Managing students must include creativity and willingness to tweak situations as you go (i.e. some things work for some teams and not for others, depending on their function). Showcase their successes. Troubleshoot the problems. Managing students effectively and creating finely honed teams can be one of the most rewarding challenges you will ever love.

Consistency w/Student Teams

Achieving consistency within your student teams requires consistency on your part: stable and available leadership, excellent communication skills (positive feedback as well as “change” feedback), and last, but not least, clear, well-defined and reasonable expectations.

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The Team Theory

“A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.”

Katzenbach & Smith
The Wisdom of Teams

Small Number

Katzenbach & Smith contend in their book, *The Wisdom of Teams*, that virtually all of the teams they “met, read, heard about, or been members of” ranged in membership numbers between 2 and 25 people. They further assert that groups larger than that have “trouble interacting constructively as a group, much less agreeing on actionable specifics.” The greater the number of members in a team the greater the level of difficulty in a) overcoming real issues such as communication and personality differences, and b) creating a mechanism within which members function in orchestration with one another.

Complimentary Skills and Common Purpose

Based on Katzenbach & Smith’s definition of a team listed above, we understand that a team is not a collection of same-skilled people performing the same task. A team arises from the need to provide a more comprehensive approach to meeting a common goal. For example, some might view computer repair as an individual-activity. However, in my particular circumstance, we have broadened our approach, thus necessitating a team approach rather than a group of same-skilled individuals. Our purpose is to increase customer satisfaction, provide computer service and repair (including virus removal) for personally owned computers and reduce/eliminate computers returning for like problems. This purpose or goal requires a broader skill set than I would expect to find or replicate in single individuals. To meet this purpose, it is neces-

sary to have the ability to communicate with non-technical clients, to communicate in a technical manner, to perform a standard set of tasks on each piece of equipment serviced, to research and identify new issues, to apply advanced computer diagnostics and to research and identify emergent issues that relate to current technology issues. This broader range of skills necessitates the development of a team of individuals who possess those complimentary skills.

Team Goals

Team goals are typically performance driven. Some goals may be quantitative in nature while some may be more qualitative in nature. Most goals should include both. Work with your team members to set goals both individually and collectively. Goals? One goal for our group is not to have computers return with viruses on them again next week or next month. To accomplish that goal, we came up with some tactics (thorough scans, updates, setting defaults for auto-updates, scan again and educate users) that would assist us in meeting those goals.

Team Accountability

“In joy or in sorrow” teams are accountable for their successes and failures. If you supervise a team, you, too, are accountable. Make sure you use the tools and methods available to make sure the joys and successes far outnumber the sorrows and failures.

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Creating Student Teams

If you're looking for the "clean" process, look someplace else. If you're searching for "reality" use this as a guide, knowing it may take you four years to be able to "move" your current student solution to a student TEAM solution (can we say "experience"?).

Define the team goal or objective

What needs to be accomplished? Are you attempting to provide service and repair to non-university owned computers? Do you want to provide a Help Desk for front-line IT support? Is it your goal to provide a place for students to be able to work with technology and to staff that area with support personnel? Are there quality of service parameters that you require? Do you have a specified timeline for accomplishing the outlined goals? Do you have communication requirements (written, verbal)? Define the team objective(s).

Identify qualities/skills essential for success

Once you have defined your team goal(s) and objective(s), it is time to evaluate what qualities/skills you need to accomplish your goals. Assess your needs for success. Does this task require oral communication skills? Strong technical skills? Fewer organizational skills and more creativity? What about project management skills? Ability to work on a deadline? Ability to communicate with a variety of people? Ability to communicate mostly on a technical level? Assess your needs. Identify the "who, what and how" to get the job done successfully.

Plan for rolling success

One strength of student teams lies in the continued renewal of resources. As students turn into seniors and contemplate graduation, I begin to look for second-semester freshmen to add to my team. This allows the most experienced team members an opportunity to train a new team member. Since your seniors should still be vested and have the most experience, this allows them to pass on those qualities. As you search for new team

members, remind yourself of the pool of skills you will be losing (with those graduating), evaluate the pool of skills remaining and identify what skills you need to acquire for the betterment of the team. Seek to retain a solid team by maintaining staff from a variety of academic levels.

Create tools to help you search

How do you find the team members you need? Ask your students for referrals. Advertise on campus (use campus job fairs, electronic announcement forums, email, bulletin boards, etc.). Create/re-evaluate job description(s) for various positions. We have also documented needed skills for positions within our department and listed those on our customized applications, asking applicants to rank their perceived level of expertise in certain areas.

Search for your team

This past semester we have contacted TA's and faculty, alerting them to job openings and asked for referrals or help with announcing open positions. Job interviews are always done. In some cases we do telephone interviews as a preliminary screening process. If you are searching for Help Desk employees, this is an important way to tell if prospective employees can communicate effectively on the phone. When doing personal interviews, always pull in your team lead to assist. We have found this allows them to develop interview skills and puts part of the responsibility for selecting additional team members on their shoulders, which encourages them to select fellow team members from a different perspective ("we" chose vs. "they" chose). Also when interviewing use "team" language: "What skills/talents do you have that would strengthen our team?"

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Selecting Team Members

There's more to "selecting team members" than placing a general job announcement and hiring a bunch of people. You need a plan. Here are some ideas to get you going.

Find people with qualities/skills from your needs assessment

Sounds simple enough, but make sure you focus your search criteria based on who you have already hired, the combinations of candidates from which to select, which qualities are critically important and which ones are simply desirable. Create your job ads this way, format your phone interviews this way and strategically design your personal interviews with these skills/qualities in sharp focus. Speak clearly about your lofty expectations for those you choose to hire - this job matters, there are clear expectations and contributions will be expected. The easy jobs are somewhere else.

Use your students as resources

Students know students. Go over the job qualifications with them - it is amazing how listening to qualities and skills (especially when you include "soft" skills) sometimes brings someone to mind. This happened with one of our positions last year and the person one of our students knew has been a fantastic find for us.

Seek those with complimentary skills

When you look for team members, remember your goal is to build a full-bodied, robust group of individuals who can work together to accomplish a desired goal. If you seek to staff a home-town grocery store, it would be silly to only hire check-out staff. You need some checkers, some baggers, some stockers, a baker, a butcher, a deli counter person and maybe even a pharmacist. These people need complimentary skills not identical skills or cookie-cutter qualifications. The strength in the "team" is the ability for people with complimentary skills to work together towards a single purpose or goal.

Don't look for replica's of yourself

Here's the tricky part. Sometimes as confident, "I know what I'm doing"-type team managers, we tend to look for people like ourselves to be team members. However, even though we may understand how that particular type of person works, they are probably not what will work best on your team. Remember, a team consists of a small number of people with complimentary skills, who have a common purpose, have team goals and are accountable as a team. Even the best Italian leather seats, do NOT a car make. Similarly: Even the best team managers do NOT a team make.

Add depth to the team

How many of you know IT CIO's who would be able to sit down and re-design the institutional web sight, or configure LDAP with your portal? Not many? That is why they hire Webmasters, Network Managers, Sys Admins, etc. This adds depth to their existing breadth of knowledge and expertise. And, it's what an effective team leader must do.

NO FEAR!

If you work with students and student teams, there is NO ROOM for fear or insecurity. I have seen entire systems fail because managers would not hire staff who knew more than themselves - nor would they allow their staff to develop their skills in a manner that would surpass their own knowledge and expertise. The power and richness of teams thrives from bringing together the best of the best and challenging them to work together, work better and develop into a superior functioning phenomenon.

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Developing Students and Student Teams

Trying to move from the “financially attractive” mode to the “essential components of IT Support” mode? Develop. Develop. Develop!

Identify Leaders

Leaders do not always jump up and wave at you - sometimes they might but don't hold your breath! I have had quiet leaders before (from whom others sought advice on a regular basis) that were more difficult to identify. Look for those who have leadership potential. After you've identified a potential leader, work with them. Evaluate their ability to see where their team fits within different scenarios (departmental unit, department, college, university, etc.). Can they make suggestions that are appropriate with that fit? Those abilities can be developed further and will help them become more valuable leaders. Seek their input with respect to other team members (identifying strengths and weaknesses). Help them identify ways to focus on the strengths and improve the weaknesses. Recently my team leader and I identified a team member who had great communication skills (and decent leadership potential) but had a tendency to promise “the moon” and was not be able to follow-through. We created an assignment that utilized those communication skills, and at the same time required REGULAR communication with clients so when “the moon” was not delivered, it would create a very awkward situation. Almost immediately we had a double-positive result: enhanced communication with clients and elimination of a negative behavior. My team leader also learned a new way to use a strength to eliminate or reduce a weakness. I'm sure this method will be used again.

Use “student appropriate” methods

Do not forget your student team/s are made up of students. Use concepts that are appropriate for where they are in life. They are a) inquisitive, excitable and motivated, b) at a crossroad leading to the

rest of their life, and c) in need of a bit of guidance for making positive change/progress. Capitalize on those strengths and nurture their development.

Challenge their “transition”

Teach your students from the beginning that this is “no regular job” - if you do your job when you hire them, they will already know this. Expect outstanding output and input from each member (and communicate those expectations). Create opportunities for and challenge them to contribute in positive ways. Teach them to work independently as well as with their fellow team members. Challenge your students in their work - to think, act, contribute and view their participation as important, adult responsibilities.

Provide mechanisms to share information

How many of you have such a robust crew of experts on your staff that you don't need outside resources? You ARE the trendsetters in the education/IT industry and all should learn from your group.... Well, stop reading, go home and start publishing. For the rest of us, we are all about sharing information - finding resources where we can search for answers and ask questions. Make sure you, as a supervisor, identify and provide mechanisms to access those information sharing resources for your staff. As you see new information on current issues, share with your staff and use that as a mechanism for additional communication. And, when your staff members share new information, cutting edge techniques, emergent information on issues that affect your area, make sure you share those with the rest of the team as well as appropriate professional staff members.

Facilitate and ensure group communication

Students will be attending classes and will not be working a 40-hour week. Even though they are a member of a team, they will have challenges finding common working hours and times. Providing ways for team members to communicate among themselves and with you is vital for success. Each situation will bring its own communication solution. Sometimes multiple communication techniques must be employed, including but not limited to: weekly staff meetings, e-mail, electronic (and old-fashioned) bulletin boards, IM/Chat, telephone, verbal-in-person conversations, notes/notebooks, post-its, etc., etc. Find what works or what combination of things work. “Shake it” every once in awhile and make sure it IS functioning.

Provide tools to facilitate growth

The phrase “you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink” comes to mind here. As a supervisor of students and student teams, it is your responsibility to provide tools for growth (water from the phrase). These tools can consist of training classes, web resources, listservs, opportunities for one-on-one training, weblogs, tech resource sites, etc. Many of your students will take advantage of these opportunities on their own and may even help you add tools to your list. How do you encourage those who are less eager? Send excerpts and links from resources to students and discuss how that information relates to current issues you are addressing. Refer students to stories and issues that you know will directly affect their work and assign the task of coming up with a proactive plan to address those issues. Sometimes facilitating growth is a simple matter of demonstrating how to connect a known issue with an unknown solution.

Identify/Address emergent issues

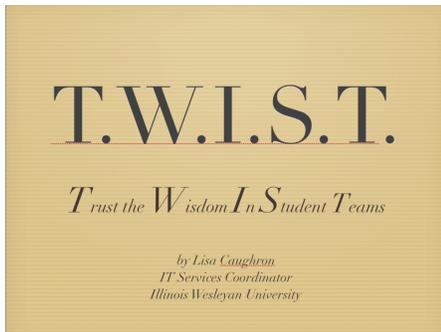
Let’s discuss two separate types of emergent issues in this section: human and situational. Human issues can range from Joe, who has been steadily identifying more and more reasons not to work his scheduled shifts, to Bill and Sue who are having more and more problems communicating in a civilized manner, to Tom who is noticing that Joe is shirking his shifts and thinking that maybe he should try that as well. Let me say, that human issues have to be dealt with right away. Perhaps Joe needs to make some permanent adjustments to his

schedule (fewer hours?) if his scheduled hours continue to conflict with his success as a student. Bill and Sue may need to be given tools or methods for communicating in a professional manner while disagreeing on personal issues. And, if Tom is noticing Joe’s scheduling difficulties, others are noticing as well. In one of our teams we took mid-semester as an opportunity to re-negotiate our weekly schedules (sometimes classes do require more time and effort than initially anticipated). By addressing human issues right away and in an up-front manner, you maintain the integrity of your student solutions.

Situational issues (major server down, network disruption, virus outbreak, or other technical difficulties) may present themselves in an emergent manner. Work with your student staff to quickly identify, understand the scope of and create a plan to deal with emergent issues. In these instances, where deviation from normal procedure occurs, you have a wonderful opportunity to teach problem solving methods to your students/student teams. Solicit their input, give them information gathering assignments, talk through the problem(s) and possible solutions so they can understand and follow your thought processes. These exercises (although typically frustrating) can provide some of the best development opportunities for your student staff.

Research ways to refine existing procedures

Technology changes. Methods evolve. Software gets updated. Make sure your existing procedures are regularly evaluated and updated. Throughout the year at staff meetings, our student teams review, evaluate and make recommendations for change for a variety of existing procedures. Sometimes procedures remain the same. Sometimes they are refined in such a manner that a whole new dimension of service evolves. Challenge your students and student teams to continually look for ways to improve the existing system.



Communicating Values

(not just tasks)

Communicating is difficult in and of itself - throw in communicating “values” and the expression takes on a whole new level of complexity. Here’s a start.

Learn your staff

Why did you choose Joe for your team instead of Bob? What qualities about Joe were important to you? Would you be able to recognize and speak to Joe when you see him at a local restaurant? If you expect your staff to care about things that are important to you, the department and the college/university, it is only fair that you get to know your staff, their strengths, their weaknesses and a little about each of them. If you want to communicate values, then identify and pair value to each of your staff.

Develop/utilize communication matrices

Just as learning styles vary from person to person, communication methods must be varied and multi-layered. I have lost count of how many times multiple forms of consecutive communication must take place for some problems to be resolved: on the phone with client, receiving email of error message while IM’ing another staff member who is facilitating resolution of problem - and sometimes another coworker verbally offering additional details at the same time. Create these types of communication matrices for your teams - they should not have to depend on “waiting until the next weekly meeting” to resolve an issue or discuss a problem. Effective, layered and dynamic communication is essential to efficient/effective teamwork.

Discuss ethical issues from various perspectives

“Hey Lisa, we have Prof. Plum’s new personal computer here to set-up and they want us to put Microsoft Office on it. Can I do that?” “We’ve moved Sam Student’s data from his old computer to his new computer but his old computer had Microsoft Office on it and this new one doesn’t. Can we install it for him?” These and other issues are GREAT conversation starters and can be fantastic opportunities to teach your staff about licensing agreements, how they change from year to year, what is included, what’s not, etc. It is also a discussion starter to help your student teams understand differences between what they may agree with personally, and what policy or regulations allow.

Ethics are best taught by example

What more can I say? If you demonstrate solid ethics in your work, your students/student teams WILL notice and follow suit. Obviously, the converse is also true.

Ask for input/collaboration - and TAKE it

A few semesters ago, I sought input from one of my student teams. We were experiencing difficulty with computers coming back after we had cleaned them and sent them home. I challenged my team to identify why so many computers were returning and how we could resolve it? They took the challenge seriously and came up with a full-featured plan that involved customizing some existing open-source software for our particular circumstances. Our professional staff did not have time to design this solution and when we showcased the product to them, they were respectfully awed. Computers do not return for these reasons anymore.

Provide Opportunities for success

It is imperative to provide your students and student teams with opportunities for success. Success is an aphrodisiac for initiative.

Be sincere and specific with “good job” comments

Thank you for making sure the area is shut down and secure at the end of your shift. You did a great job researching that problem and coming up with a solution. That was a tough call - you kept your cool and gave them the information they needed to move on - take a deep breath - good job. Be sincere. Be specific.

SMILE and communicate honestly

Sometimes you do have to say “no.” Help your staff learn the difference between disagreeing with something they are doing and being disagreeable. They will listen more openly if you communicate with respect and honesty (and it doesn’t hurt to smile at them).

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Recognizing Achievements

Whether by formal or informal means, an essential tool in increasing the excitement and level of student employee contribution toward the goal of your organization is “recognizing achievements.”

Reward effort

In this world of instant gratification we live in, sometimes it is difficult to find those who will go the extra mile, work a little harder than they are used to or share an idea that may or may not work. To ensure these characteristics remain alive and well in your organization, make sure you reward (not only the finished product) but the effort your students or student teams put into the project. Tell them “thank you,” talk about their efforts to others, create certificates of merit, give some specialty assignments - find a way to reward their efforts.

Encourage collegiality

As our students move through this transition from student to “the real world” it is very good for them (and it is a good way to strengthen their value both now and in the future) to be provided with the opportunity to work and interact with IT Professional Staff members. Encourage appropriate collegiality between your students and student teams. When there is a need for them to seek out specialized information or assist another professional staff member by performing a task the student may specialize in, encourage and support those opportunities. This allows a more mature level of communication to evolve among your students and student teams - a “professional rapport,” if you will.

Showcase group projects

What a great way to recognize achievements! Let me share a couple of examples of how this has worked for us. Example 1: A few years ago, our S&R Team created a CD using a virus scanning method that allowed us to run virus/adware/spyware/rootkit scans on computers prior to them loading Windows. This allowed us to clean com-

puters much more thoroughly than traditional methods. And our return rate on computers decreased so significantly, we set up a session with our Professional Desktop Support division of IT and allowed our student team to showcase this project. The work this student team did was met with great approval by our professional staff. What a cool opportunity to be able to “wow” the professionals. Not only was this able to demonstrate a level of professionalism by our student team but it provided our professional staff with a resource they did not have time to develop or test. Indeed, it was a win-win situation. Example 2: In our IT and Library Tech Labs, our student staff needed to become proficient with movie-making technology. In order to make this a more exciting experience, students were grouped together in smaller groups and were asked to create a movie that would address a particular IT issue (identity theft, protecting your computer, etc.). A deadline was given by which the movies were to be submitted. The movies were viewed by participants and were judged by a panel. Prizes were awarded to the best movie (top prize was an iPod). Were they motivated? Did they learn? Did they enjoy the project? Will we try that again? YES!

Recommendation Letters

As a manager of students and/or student teams, another tool you should possess in your motivational tool belt is that of being able to write phenomenal recommendation letters. If you don't know how, LEARN! These letters are critical to your students as they move on in the world, whether it is to a job, grad school, an internship, a scholarship, etc.