

Student Staff: A Village Philosophy

Lisa Caughron
Illinois Wesleyan University
PO Box 2900
Bloomington, IL 61702-2900
(309) 556-3900
caughron@iwu.edu

ABSTRACT

In institutions of higher education, we seek to engage students in the act and art of life-long learning. We also seek to capture this talent-rich and moldable population to provide support in areas of need. By using a village philosophy, we not only develop a responsible and effective group of student resources, we also teach them to develop others (a lifelong art), simultaneously developing a highly functional and effective support group.

As a manager of students, do you find yourself using the same old phrases: do this, follow directions, don't do that, come in for this shift, etc.? What if the students became vested in the success of their job and their institution? What if they took ownership of the processes they performed? What if they cared about improving and fine-tuning the function of their team so it performed in an outstanding manner?

By utilizing a village philosophy, you go beyond teaching job skills to developing life long learning skills, community values and the ability to work as part of a team. At Illinois Wesleyan, our Help Desk and Service & Repair areas have done just that. Students create their own schedules, advertise positions, interview candidates, make hiring recommendations, and internally correct behaviors. They research, analyze, create and implement methods for improvement based on trends. They contribute to and have ownership of the successes and failures of their particular areas.

Does it really work? What do students say?

Keywords

Student Staff, Staff Development, Student Management, Staff Management, Student Workers, Training, Student Development.

1. VILLAGE BASICS

A village philosophy focuses on creating an environment that attracts a creative mix of student staff, desiring to be challenged. Given developmental support and guidance, they hone leadership skills and capitalize on the availability of opportunities to create and deploy unique methods to responsibly address community technology issues and be accountable for their resolution/s.

1.1 Building and defining your village environment

As you begin to develop a village philosophy, it is important that those with whom you work (student staff, and even more directly, your student leaders) share an understanding of base concepts and purpose. Having conversations about the core functions of your particular village are key. Questions such as: "What is the purpose of this functional area? Who are our clients? What services do we offer? What are we trying to accomplish?" provide the framework and key topics that engender a collaborative, collective and core understanding among your entire staff of students (and should be supported by the professional staff in your area). Before a village philosophy can translate into a true reality and vision, these basic premises must be defined and understood by all.

1.2 Shaping the functionality and responses from your environment

Once you've defined your village environment, it is important to begin shaping how the village will function and respond to the needs of the community for which it exists. To begin shaping and developing that functionality of response, answers to these questions may provide guidance and direction: "What is special or unique about our clients? How may we provide better service to them? Do we provide the service they need? What quality of service do we offer? Are our clients delighted with the service we provide? What services should we offer to meet the needs of our clients? What issues are our clients facing?" By identifying and discussing these and other like-minded questions with your student staff, they begin to shape the functionality and responses from the village environment you've defined together. Working through the process of evaluating these questions also helps in the development of learning processes and critical thinking skills. It teaches a thought pattern aligned with the concept of strategic planning.

1.3 Creating and developing your village vision - building for the future

We've talked about defining our village environment (understanding who we are and why we're here). We've talked about shaping the functionality and responses we'll provide (understanding what we need to do based on our purpose). Now, let's talk about developing our village vision and building for the future. This might also be considered a form of strategic planning. To facilitate future planning and thinking, these questions might help: "Based on current trends, what services should we prepare to offer? What additional services might benefit our clients? How do we communicate ideas to address and conquer issues that our clients may not even know exist? What is our

service focus today compared to what it should be next year? What new skills do we need to better address the needs of our clients? What tools do we need to acquire (or create) to meet those needs?" Examining these forward-thinking issues and planning for them help keep our village moving and less likely to stagnate. It also develops a pattern for our student staff to think about, strategize and participate in the lifelong planning for our village. It reinforces the notion that villages, services, companies, institutions and even our world exist before, during and after our direct interaction with them thus engendering a philosophy of "doing one's part" during the time we are able to contribute. Students doing strategic planning, thinking and functioning on a more global level, oh, my! What will they be next: Leaders? I'm certainly counting on it.

2. VILLAGE REALITIES - MAKING THE VISIONS REAL

There is a difference between philosophical theories and reality. In one sense, we've been talking about concepts and theories. But I've tried to blend those with practical real time methods that are currently in use, functioning and working well. They provide solid experience for our students and give them a solid foothold into the post-baccalaureate world for which we, as staff at educational institutions, attempt to prepare them. That said, the bottom line to this village philosophy is to create a unique and collaborative blend that combines philosophical theory, conceptualization, practical application, strategic planning, critical thinking, development and reality into a full-bodied experience that will serve us well today and serve them well tomorrow.

2.1 Philosophical discussions with Staff Leadership

Have those philosophical discussions with your student staff leadership. Use this village philosophy to help them develop those outside-the-box thinking and planning skills. Why is this important? These perspectives not only create a scenario within which your student village (unit) can successfully function, they demonstrate and teach future real world application of principles.

What does that mean? Let's say that your particular village is functioning as a Help Desk. And, for example, the folks in Network are changing the campus wireless authentication protocol so it will function with newer computer operating systems that are coming out (the old way will no longer work). Just telling your Help Desk staff that the changes will happen and outlining what they might or will entail would be one option of handling this change. However, the village philosophy might be better served by sharing the problem (current wireless authentication protocol will soon not work with newer computers). Identifying the solution the Network group has defined (migrating to a new wireless protocol for the campus). And then, only as necessary to incentivize the discussion, begin to offer leading comments and questions such as: "Would you know how to change your wireless authentication settings? Do you think our clients will?" "If you were our client what information would you need or want to have? And when?" "If these changes take place building by building (I know our Network group can't physically make this change happen in 1 day), what do you think we should do to prepare for them?" "What information do you need from the Network group to create a plan of action?" "Our clients are different and they respond to different communication methods, so how do we best reach them?" "Which of our clients have priority in receiving this information?" "Why?" "Should we create varying levels of information?" "Ideas?" These questions and comments create an environment for critical thinking, discussion and planning. It engages your students by challenging them to come up with processes for project implementation.

As a supervisor of student staff, your job is to guide the process (not do it), intervene when needed (not just because you might choose a *different* way of doing things) and encourage the development of those skills among your staff. They will learn to function in a much more independent manner and can take ownership and pride in their work because of your encouragement and willingness to let them create and implement solutions. They will also begin to think more globally and will be better prepared for life and jobs after their interlude at your institution.

IMPORTANT NOTE: As a supervisor of student staff, you must never forget that the "buck stops here". There will be times when your intervention is necessary and appropriate. If any of your village staff feel like they have been left unsupported, you are not doing your job. And they will not feel empowered to participate in the village developmental process. If your clients are not being served adequately, you are not doing your job. And you will not be teaching your village appropriate responsibilities. Your job is to teach, support and develop your staff while assuring that the service of your village takes place in a superior manner.

2.2 Hiring

Hiring the right students at the right time is critical to the success of your village. In our villages, we accomplish this with varying methods depending upon the function of the village. However, in all instances, our hiring processes include, to a very significant degree, our current members and staff leadership. They are prompted to evaluate the skills and qualifications needed to make their village function more effectively. Note: our goal is always to raise the bar, heighten our skill level and take our village functionality to the next level; going backwards or simply maintaining status quo is not an option. Once skills are identified and applicants are believed to be in possession of those skills, interviews take place. Again, our student village leaders take ownership of this process. During the interview process, our leadership is very clear about heightened expectations to work both independently and as part of a team; to accomplish the routine as well as research new methods and procedures for solutions implementation; that by accepting a position with this village, you become a part of it and are thereby responsible for its care and edification. Our student leadership takes this process very seriously and are very selective about whom they wish to bring into their village. Ethics, responsibility and trustworthiness are of significant importance.

2.3 Training

Our villages use varying training methods based on their service function. However, a standard they all agree upon is that our new village members must be paired with the “best” during their orientation and training periods. This is important for a couple of significant reasons. The performance level of a village member is directly affected by whom they are trained. To achieve the best results, offer the best mentor. Second, by the time students reach a leadership position within the village, they not only care about its current level of functionality, they want to see it succeed and flourish in the future. Selecting individuals who can contribute to than continuation of functionality becomes very important. As supervisors who may struggle with the conflicting issues of needing a “permanent” staff member in a position but only having funding or support for student staff, this evolutionary process becomes significantly important. Villages of student staff offer highly effective solutions.

2.4 Scheduling

Different villages require different scheduling implementations. This function is also a great training opportunity for your village leaders. As a supervisor, conversations with your leadership staff about available budgets, hours to fill, staffing levels, etc., all bring heightened awareness and ownership of leadership skills and responsibility. Coordinating appropriate levels of coverage during varying times of day, pairing of varying skill and experience levels, maintaining consistency of service throughout service hours are all skills that are able to be developed and accomplished by student leadership staff.

2.5 Dealing with Problems/Issues/Variance from Village Rules & Procedures

Sounds too good to be true - there must be problems you're not telling us about, right? For a significant portion of the time, things work very well. However, problems do occur. But these too, present an opportunity for training and development especially within our leadership staff. Problems also present an opportunity for the process to become stronger and more full-bodied.

We do have a process for dealing with performance that is less-than-stellar whether it might be attendance, following through on an issue, or other problem. Our villages have a step-process for dealing with these types of issues. Our step process relies on varying mechanisms of communication, confrontation and consequences. Note: This step process would be sharply adjusted should a breach of ethics occur (proceeding to Step 5 would be an appropriate action and is discussed during the interview process).

2.5.1 Step 1

Step 1. When a deviation is recognized, either by a supervisor or village staff leadership, the matter is addressed verbally. Verbal review of the deviant action and gentle communication reminders of appropriate action are made with inquiries as to whether unknown issues are/were at play that need to be addressed.

2.5.2 Step 2.

If the deviant action continues, the village staff leader will distribute an email notice to the appropriate person or group being very clear what the deviant action is and what the appropriate action should be. It is also appropriate, in individual situations (rather than group situations) for this email notice to include the notation that the email is a “written warning” regarding the deviant behavior.

2.5.3 Step 3.

If the deviant action still continues, the village staff leader sends a 2nd email, with a copy to the supervisor, indicating that the notice is a 2nd written warning regarding a particular behavior or performance. Stronger language is used. Review of appropriate behaviors and other substantiating information is presented. Definitive timeframes are set for appropriate behaviors. The first presentation of reviewing one's desire to be a member of our village staff is also mentioned in this communiqué with the individual, asking them to review the appropriateness of the fit of this position with their goals and desires.

2.5.4 Step 4.

Should the deviant action continue, a meeting is scheduled. Meeting participants include the individual deviating from appropriate performance, the village staff leader and the village supervisor. During this meeting the village staff leader and supervisor review the deviant action, the appropriate action, the previous step process that has been utilized as well as responses or commitments made by the individual member. A choice is typically presented to the individual at this time whether they wish to continue with their membership in the village and if they continue, they are asked to describe what they intend to do to resolve the deviant issues being addressed and for a commitment to do so. The member is also informed that continued membership in the village is entirely dependant on their acceptable performance.

2.5.5 Step 5.

Should the deviant action continue, the member is separated.

3. VILLAGE IN REVIEW - CONCLUSIONS

3.1 Does it work?

Does it work? Yes. Why? Because for 18-22 year olds the surest way to successfully challenge and inspire them is to communicate: “I know becoming a member of a village like ours is something that most students are not ready to tackle, but I believe that you are – and that we can *make a difference!*” By acknowledging what you're asking them to do is above and beyond what others may believe they are able or capable of doing, it sets the bar high. If students understand the vision is lofty and still want to embrace the challenge, you will succeed.

And, by setting the goal high, you seek students that are willing and desire to stretch for and attain excellence (not perfection – EXCELLENCE!).

3.2 What do students say?

What do students say? What did they appreciate about this environment? Dan writes about being “engaged in his [our] jobs, which, in turn, kept job satisfaction high among students.” He also wrote most positively about enjoying the “additional opportunities where students could broaden their experience at IT” and the “environment where people were encouraged to go beyond the required and explore other options.” Sarah talked about being “challenged...to take ownership of technology problems that assaulted the campus and to find a solution” and that by believing in them as student staff, “in turn, we began to believe in ourselves”. Sarah also adds “to this day, I know I can walk into the IT office and find it the same as always: a place where I felt accepted and challenged...” Emily writes that “the key driver... is trust... the more trust you put in people, the more they step up to the plate to deliver.” She goes on to talk about “the job being a learning experience and a benefit to us.... I was always more engaged in my job at the Help Desk than in other jobs ... I wasn’t just going through the motions, but I was actually learning.” Emily, who did her Master’s level study in the field of Human Resources, felt it was important that supervisors “care enough about your person development, and recognize the benefit of adding that extra step in their management style.” Mark writes about his experience and the importance of the utilization of “veteran staff to train and develop new staff members” and that by learning the strengths of students and putting them in positions that could take advantage of those strengths, (which included putting him in a supervisory position) helped him start his career in information technology. Kristin said she felt empowered as a student staff member because she was given access to “all the tools” she needed to succeed, that resources were available and expectations were clear.

3.3 Conclusions

We believe this village philosophy is a highly effective model. It not only meets the needs of our community, it develops life-long learning skills, community values and the ability to work as part of a team. By using a village philosophy, we not only develop a responsible and effective group of student resources, we also teach them to develop others (a life-long art), simultaneously developing a highly functional and effective support group.