

Cultivating Accountability by Eliciting Upward Feedback

Zoom Webinar Q&A

We ran short on time, so we saved the questions from the Zoom webinar Q&A and answered them asynchronously in order to share on the CALM website along with other session materials.

So here's my question: so often the processes for upward mobility in the profession do nothing to capture this kind of work. I just went through this process at my place of work, and it was so dehumanizing, and so far has not gone my way, even though I have worked so hard to create this kind of culture within the library. How can we capture the competencies for ourselves and others when the system for promotion won't really let us? or doesn't value it?

Chelcie: We answered this question live, so I'll try to capture here some of the perspectives we shared extemporaneously. First, I'm sorry you've had a demoralizing experience of going up for promotion and not having your work as a manager valued. I don't think I have all the answers for how to effect a substantial shift in the culture at your org, which sounds like it's needed in order for management competencies to be valued and rewarded in promotion processes. For my part, I have started including goals related to management in my annual goals — things like advocating for pay equity or position redefinitions. I have the support of my supervisor in doing this, and I think she evaluates my performance of these goals as part of my annual review. At my institution, promotion is another thing. I don't think our guidelines for promotion from Assistant Librarian to Associate Librarian (we're staff, not faculty, but we do have promotion in rank) particularly values excellence in management competencies.

Chelcie — did the feedback go straight to your supervisor as well?

Chelcie: Yes, my direct reports sent the feedback directly to me, my supervisor, and my three new direct reports. Later I saved their feedback and my leadership philosophy from both years in a shared location in Box.

How did the presenter negotiate using employee feedback in this presentation when there was some assumed confidentially?

Chelcie: This is an important question — and one that I'm sorry to say I didn't consider. Preparing for CALM I felt very vulnerable myself (sharing openly about my mental health and feedback I received). As part of the leadership philosophy that I wrote in response to their feedback, I did ask for and receive consent to share the feedback I received with my own cohort of informal peer mentors. However, I did not think to seek consent to share specific feedback that I received before presenting at CALM. Upon reflection, that was a mistake. So, after getting your question, and before we posted our session materials publicly, I shared my slides and speaker notes with all my direct reports and

asked their consent to post publicly. They all granted consent and didn't express any specific questions or concerns. While they viewed it as an oversight on my part not to have asked prior to presenting at CALM, they appreciated my owning my mistake and seeking their consent before posting on the conference website.

Chelcie, amazing presentation, thank you. Could you share how Tufts handles peer review? And are you unionized?

Chelcie: Library workers at Tufts are not unionized. We are administrative/professional staff, and we have two forms of review: (1) annual review by your supervisor, and (2) promotion within rank (e.g., Assistant Librarian, Associate Librarian, Librarian). In the case of promotion, we have a committee of library peers who evaluate an application for promotion based on a portfolio and letters of recommendation speaking to accomplishments in librarianship, scholarship, and service. The committee makes recommendations to the Tufts Libraries Council, which in turn makes a recommendation to the Provost, who has the final decision-making power. I just went up for promotion from Assistant to Associate Librarian, and I included excerpts from the feedback I received from direct reports in my portfolio, speaking to my excellence in librarianship, since my role as a librarian includes leading a department and supervising 6 people.

I've always wanted this sort of feedback from my team but because the department is so small, have been concerned that team members wouldn't feel safe sharing even in an "anonymous" group format. Any suggestions for ways of helping folks in very small departments feel safe participating in this sort of process?

Chelcie: The first time we went through this process I only had 3 direct reports, so it was a very small team, and perfect anonymity was never going to be possible. But I think there are other principles for creating psychological safety, e.g., trustworthiness (transparency, communication, consistency, predictability), choice/consent, and collaboration/mutuality. I think I'd already demonstrated a measure of trustworthiness as a supervisor. And then I tried to build in choice and collaboration at multiple steps of the way — for example, by asking in a 1:1 setting if they'd be up for this and what their concerns were, then proposing a framework but asking for their participation in revising/rethinking that framework at our department meeting. All that said, anonymity is about not being able to single an individual out for retribution. Before they went offsite to discuss their feedback for me, we didn't have an explicit conversation about whether the written document they'd produce would include outlier or long tail perspectives. When they got together, they found that they shared almost all the same perspectives, and they decided to leave out the few outliers as things that it would be better for that individual to bring up with me. During the second round, we did address this question explicitly and decided that it might be appropriate to provide some indication of whether a particular piece of feedback was supported by some or all direct reports; however, they found that they generally agreed on all items, as they had the previous year. For other small teams who are considering an upward feedback process, I'd say to talk about this from the outset — and

consider that if the feedback only represents perspectives shared by everyone, it'd be harder for an evil manager to single an individual out for retribution.

Question for Chelcie: What kind of relationship did you have with your original team before new members joined (after the reorg)? Did you hire everyone in your original team?

Chelcie: I was not involved in hiring anyone who reports to me (not the original 3 or the expanded 6). For my part, I would say that I had a positive working relationship with each person.

I asked our university's HR about the possibility of this kind of feedback, and I got a LOT of pushback. Did you have any pushback from above about this, and how were you able to move forward?

Thank you for this. I wonder if you think/notice/wonder if this will shift the culture in your institution? Will peer managers (or *gasp* your manager) also adopt these practices? Seems like there's a better chance of success, engagement if folks become accustomed to these practices & see them working elsewhere.

Chelcie: I'm going to respond to these two questions together. I had the support of my immediate supervisor in carrying out this experiment. When I advocated for peer managers to consider a similar process, they were open to considering but reluctant to try something new at that moment (during ongoing pandemic) due to concerns about cognitive load (so important as Hannah emphasized). I'm hopeful that presenting at CALM and being able to point to Hannah's process, as well, will provide the foundation for continued advocacy within my organization.

How do you integrate the work your team members want to do with the library's goals?

Chelcie: Well, it's a negotiation. In my experience, the work my direct reports are motivated to do isn't wildly outside of their role at the library, so I haven't faced the necessity of either advocating for a major position redefinition or helping a person to find meaning within their role as currently defined. But I'm very interested in what motivates them to do their work in a library context — is it about making students' lives easier? is it about working toward a more just scholarly communication ecosystem? And using my understanding of their motivations to push their work in particular directions.

For Chelcie: in a practical sense, how did you provide time for your team to do this work for you? Did you direct them to do this, and was that awkward? Did a single person prepare a report for you on behalf of the group, or did you create a document for them to share? Did your team find this emotional labor burdensome?

Chelcie: I was worried about the cognitive load for everyone and also worried that one person might have to take on even more labor. During Round 1 I asked if they were willing to participate in this upward feedback process, and they were willing. The time commitment was doing a little bit of reflection, discussing as a group, and providing a written document. They met and discussed, then they created a Box Note that they could each edit, and then one person took on the role of synthesizing and submitting to me, my supervisor, and my three soon-to-be additional direct reports. During Round 2 we basically repeated the process, except that they used our standard department meeting time (without me there). I asked for a different person to be the synthesizer/submitter. We talked about it being a rotating role (that's part of our department culture, e.g., to have rotating notetakers and timekeepers for our department meetings). I haven't received feedback that anyone found the emotional labor burdensome, but we gave thought ahead of time to putting boundaries on the time and labor required.

Can you talk a little about the demographics of the staff you worked with (who provided the feedback up to you)? Curious if ages were close to yours (or not); if they had a lot of longevity in their positions, or were new to the institution for example, and if that might make a difference in getting one's staff on board with providing upward feedback.

Hannah: My direct reports are by and large closer to my age than a lot of folks I work with, but several of them do have a fair number of years at my institution. I found that those who had a long history at ISU were extremely pleased at being asked their feedback because it was not done before. The newer folks were totally game, and did not think it so strange. There was very little resistance overall; an eagerness even hahaha! It's such a simple thing (though terrifying) to ask for input that can make such a huge difference to staff morale, engagement, and willingness to be there for you. I wish I recalled who said this in my past but I've brought it with me; I want staff to be comfortable 'standing up to me, and standing up for me.' You can't ask them to do the latter, if you don't give them the opportunity for the former.

Chelcie: All the folks in our department are pretty close in age. We ranged in longevity from 1 to 10 years at Tufts. Like Hannah, I found that folks were very game. +1 what Hannah said about 'standing up to me, and standing up for me.'

Could you discuss how this might have been a different experience if you didn't have a supportive manager? I'm thinking of those of us who have trouble being the leader we truly want to be because our boss isn't an effective, supportive boss? My local culture is such that my high-level boss is unlikely to ever improve (very close to retirement). Sigh.

Chelcie: My sympathies! I don't know how well I can speak to this because I've been fortunate not to have had terrible managers. If your goal is to elicit feedback, maybe you can do that because you have authority and autonomy among the people who report to you. If your goal is to cultivate a culture of upward feedback across your institution so that you can document the shortcomings of your boss or your boss's boss...that's a harder challenge.

Question for Hannah: Sorry, I missed some timeline details. How long were you in the supervisor position before feedback was solicited from your direct reports?

Hannah: I conducted the review 1 and 1 month year after starting the position. As a brand new manager, I would say 1 year to 1.5 years is probably a good amount of time to at least present your supervisory tendencies and highlight areas to focus on. Anything shorter than a year, you still finding your feet, you know?

Hannah — did you work with HR within the library or the university wide HR? At my library we have one librarian who manages HR and then a separate HR group for the whole university that she works with.

Hannah: That's a loaded question, only because my HR rep was within the library, but is now part of university HR, but still lives in the library. Sooooo both? But the important part was she actually knew my staff to some degree, she wasn't getting feedback blind, which I found particularly helpful.

Hannah, amazing presentation. Sorry if I missed this — are you unionized? How does this feedback tie into peer review?

Hannah: Thank you! We are not unionized. This feedback process is not normal at my institution, so it ties to nothing if I let it go. Still, I've made a point of including it in my annual evaluation (both good and improvements to be made) because it was such a big deal both as a culture shift, as a manager, and because it took so much time and has real meaning. I also want to model how I would like my supervisors to work — as staff, I totally want opportunities to express my appreciation and needs to be successful outside annual evaluations when they're deciding whether I get a raise or not (when raises were a thing).

There seems to be a stark difference in the feedback process for a white woman vs. a black woman in a managerial role, the process for latter being more rigorous with more periodic follow up. Is this something that the presenters felt/discussed?

Hannah: We felt it. The processes were different. The reason they were so different is intangible, so it's difficult to *really* say what's going on there. It could be a need the staff had to feel safe, it could be that HR felt for some reason that there needed to be follow up because I'm a Black woman. Chelcie and I have talked about this (because she and I can do this). I don't know that I have an answer because who's going to say the process difference was racially grounded? I will say though, as a Black woman, having HR involvement and documentation is helpful as it follows traditional record keeping and doesn't brand my process as irregular or otherwise disturbing. I have to reflect on this more. Chelcie and I have talked about reflecting on this more because we outlined our processes to each other and noticed differences and asked a very similar question as you pose here.

Chelcie: Yes. This is a hard question, and I don't know the answer. I will say that my department members and I were making all of this up as we went along because there was no institutional process in place. And that's a problem. Hannah's more formalized process helped to hold her accountable to her direct reports and addressed the power differential between supervisor and supervisees. I didn't have actors more powerful than me holding me to account on behalf of my direct reports. If I were a dishonorable actor, if I didn't follow through as we'd agreed upon, if I decided never to do this again, no one would hold me accountable. Having now seen Hannah's process, I'm interested in formalizing and institutionalizing based on their model — involving central HR, advocating for this kind of feedback process to be implemented at Tisch Library beyond my department. I think having this presentation and both processes visible will help with that advocacy work within my organization.