MERGING UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENTS, SCHOOLS AND FACULTIES
WHEN WILL THE MUSIC STOP?

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Over the past five years or so it seems that organisational change in the higher education sector has led to the mergers of small academic departments and service units into combined ones or small schools merging with three of four others to form one large school. In some cases only two or three years later some merged schools are then involved in a faculty or division merger and the game of musical chairs begins again. There are a number of reasons for these changes which include:

- Strength in numbers – larger schools and units do stand a better chance of survival
- Ever decreasing funding – the need to create economies of scale
- Information technology – changes to how we communicate amongst our selves and to our students
- Changing teaching methods and an expansion of the education world - globalisation
- Development of a corporate culture to embrace and lead change

Workplace change affects everyone involved and all staff experience a degree of disruption to their job and working environment. However, general staff often face role and responsibility changes in order to meet the needs of a new structure and there are some fundamental principles that can be applied to ensure that the reorganisation of staff roles is managed openly and effectively.

- Good leadership – a person or persons who can lead the change process and take control of it early
- Sound planning – establishing clear plans from the start and sharing it with all those involved. Analysis of existing work practices is vital before implementing any changes.
- Clear direction and support from the top – the changes must be supported at the highest level
- Good communication – ensure all staff are involved and the goals are clear. Maintain regular communication about the process and develop methods to obtain feedback and allow for all staff to provide input.
- Implementation – goes hand in hand with good leadership. Implement the plan and ensure it is carried out well.
- Monitor along the way – develop systems to keep track of how the new structure is working and allow for variation to the plan and adjust where necessary

Forming larger organisational units is not an easy task to manage but with the correct approach and right people leading the charge the impact can be managed effectively.

Piers Brissenden has been involved in the management and implementation of two mergers in the past five years, most recently involving the merger of four schools into one at UniSA; he will present a talk on the techniques and approaches used, how it has affected general staff and about some of the outcomes now the music has died down.

INTRODUCTION
Being part of a university department or school merger can be quite daunting to general staff. The reality is that mergers result in general staff having to go through a process that often means physical relocation, co-location with new colleagues, possibly applying for your own job or at worst involuntary redundancy. For general staff who may not be as involved in the bigger picture motivations for merging it can seem a bit like playing musical chairs – never being sure when the music will stop and things settle down.

In 1999 the departments of Botany and Zoology at The University of Adelaide merged to form the Department of Environmental Biology on the North Terrace campus and involved some twenty general staff coming together to form new work groups. In 2003 the schools of Podiatry, Physiotherapy, Medical Radiation, Human Movement and Occupational Therapy at The University of South Australia merged to form the School of Health Sciences. This merger involved some seventeen general staff and spanned over City East and Underdale campuses. In both cases I have been part of the management team charged with assisting plan, develop and implement the formation of coherent general staff work groups. This paper asks the questions; what methods can be used to develop effective new work groups, how can general staff be provided with opportunity for input into the decision making process and what are some practical ways to deal with change.

IDENTIFYING HOW THINGS ARE DONE AND WHO DOES WHAT
There are specific areas of support within general staff groups that can be identified. Two obvious categories are administrative and technical. Within those two groups are a range of activities which

include academic support, financial, infrastructure, information technology, occupational health and safety and support to teaching and research.

Before forming new work groups it is important to determine which staff possess the right balance of skills and abilities to meet the needs of a newly formed school. Selecting the various roles for staff should be based on knowledge and experience as well as the motivated abilities of those staff. In other words try and fit the person to a job that they are good at and have abilities that come naturally. Motivated abilities generally result from a person enjoying a particular task because they are good at it.

In addition to this, the increased size of a new school, both in terms of the numbers of people and possibly geographical spread across multiple buildings or campuses, provides a number of difficulties and challenges particularly with respect to management, levels of support to School activities and communication amongst all parties. There is a need therefore to reconsider the way in which staff and facilities are managed. This reconsideration needs to ensure that we effectively manage personnel, continue to deliver quality outcomes and obtain maximum benefit from financial and physical resources. In order to achieve these objectives we need to ensure that there is good communication between groups and that we make the best use of the skills and interests of existing staff.

THE FORUM APPROACH

One approach that has been used in both abovementioned mergers has been to hold general staff forums that allow staff to consider ways to respond to the challenges. In particular it provides opportunity to consider current (or pre-merge) organisational structures that are in place and address the question: Do these structures provide a good fit with the current needs and priorities for the new school?

A number of issues that could be addressed within the context of this forum and include:

1. *What do we expect from general staff?*

   - Management of financial systems
   - Management of facilities & infrastructure
   - Management of IT
   - Support to teaching programs
   - Support to academics, timetabling, enrolments
   - Provision of a safe working environment
   - What else?

2. *How should we best manage staff, facilities and finances in order to ensure the best use of our resources in order to achieve the desired outcomes?*

This question could be addressed in two stages:

   a) What are the benefits of the current arrangement? Eg. Issues of job satisfaction associated with pride in ones work and specific responsibilities.

   b) What is wrong with the current arrangements? Eg. The current system does not necessarily ensure accountability, quality of outcomes, efficient and effective use of resources.

What are the alternatives?

One specific proposal that could be considered is the establishment of a team based approach to the management of general staff responsibilities. Teams would have a collective responsibility for ensuring certain outcomes (rather than that responsibility being given to individuals). This would ensure that responsibilities are covered when staff are on leave, allow greater flexibility in the deployment of staff and improve operational management.

3. *If a team-based approach is used then the following questions remain:*
   - What teams are needed?
   - Who would constitute the various teams?
   - Could people be in more than one team?
   - How would teams be managed (should there be a nominated team leader)?
   - How would teams be resourced (should they have their own budget)?
   - Who would define team responsibilities (role of the manager)?
   - How would teams interact (management of diffuse responsibilities such as OH&S)?

4. *If an alternative approach is defined then a similar series of questions are still appropriate:*
   - How should people, facilities and finances be managed?
   - How do these interact with one another?
   - How should general and technical staff interact with academic staff?
   - How do they interact with other university departments?
   - How do they interact externally?

Involving the staff in a forum to address these questions provides an open, non-threatening opportunity to consider appropriate responses. The forum is also useful way of learning about the

skills and experience of staff and is best held within the first three to six months of a merger.

Prior the forum, each person should provide to the manager a list of their current duties and competencies. The forum is then held to provide an opportunity for new staff to meet each other and consider ways in which the new work groups may form. An approach that has proved useful to me is to run a half day forum with the first hour being a get to know you session. Staff have been asked to bring with them three issues that need to be addressed in order for them to work better. The issues can relate to any aspect of their work. After the getting to know you session categories are written up and it is time for the issues to be assigned to a category. Categories could include Academic teaching support, Research support, Information Technology, Health and Safety, Communication, Human Resources, Field work and Laboratories. Allow an hour or so for people to call out their issues and allocate them to a category. By the end of this session there will be a list of things that people think need to be addressed for them to work better. It is this list that can form the basis of a medium term plan for the new school.

Refer to appendix 1 for a suggested forum agenda

FORMING NEW WORK GROUPS

Teamwork is a philosophy which can be adopted by every workplace. "For an organisation to change, it must have certain ingredients present within its culture" [1, 250]. Cultures where values are intensely held and broadly shared promote employees to accept and increase their commitment to the organisation's vision and mission. It is therefore vital that the foundation to support change exists before implementing programs aimed at altering workplace activities.

Figure 1 shows the structure of two different types of work teams. One being an integrated approach overseen by a coordinator or manager and the other an autonomous model.
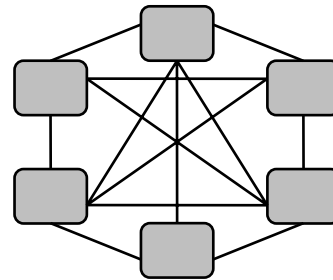
Figure 1: Two types of work teams

Integrated work team
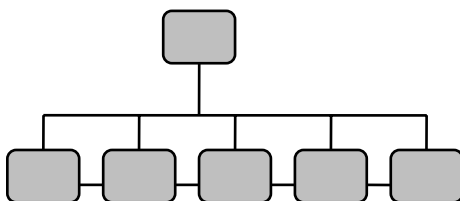
A group accomplishes many tasks by making specific assignments to members

and rotating jobs among members as required

Autonomous work team

A vertically integrated team that is given almost complete autonomy in determining how tasks will be done

After Robbins [262, 1988]

The second model could perhaps be adapted to suit the university environment by allowing semi-autonomous teams report to the manager. However, in both mergers I have been involved with the integrated work teams model has been used. Establishing work groups as allowed for provision during staff absences. It should also be acknowledged that some staff may well be in more than one work group.

At the University of South Australia the School of Health Sciences general staff were involved in a forum some six months after merging. The amount of time that had passed since combining the four former schools allowed staff to provide meaningful input on the day. This is an important factor when considering the timing of getting the work groups together to discuss how new groups should interact considering an appropriate work team structure.

THE INFLUENCE OF WORKPLACE CULTURE

Workplace culture can be described as "a system of shared values, assumptions, beliefs and norms held by members of an organisation" [1, 269]. It includes unwritten rules of behaviour, values and social order of the organisation in addition to written policies and procedures that serve as work rules for every employee. One of the most significant difficulties when merging areas together is that despite being guided by corporate systems, each group will usually have their own unique way of doing things. It should not be underestimated just how disruptive this can be when trying to establish consistent support systems and processes.

If workplace culture does not support individual employee participation and advancement then independent roles may well not be developed to full potential. Reinforcing the company values within policies and reward systems contribute to an employee's awareness of the workplace norms.

The following management principles can be used to assist change in the workplace and the planning and developing of work teams. They may even help to break down some disruptive workplace cultures.

Characteristics of effective teams
Commitment to a common goal, solid leadership, mutual trust and respect, flexibility, and well structured procedures are all characteristics of an effective team. This is supported by Kezsbom who observes that staff "are aware of the very nature of their interdependent roles, and how their respective talents complement their efforts to assure project success" [2] Team members should possess skills and talents for the tasks required and use them to their full potential with scope for further development. Roles and tasks must be clearly defined, with the avenues of communication open and clear, to allow for discussion and input. Feedback should be weighted positively so that team members feel valued and empowered in their contributions. Results must reflect the goal but not lose sight of the individual, encouraging experimentation and creativity, and appreciation when success has been achieved at either a stage or final completion.   In figure two Robbins has summarised the characteristics discussed.

Figure 2: Effective teams
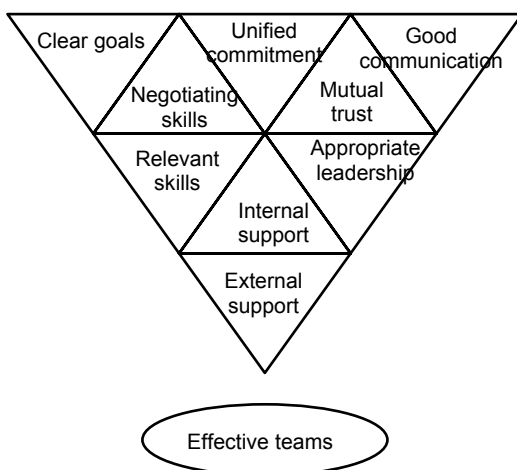
After Robbins et al [521, 1997]

Building teams and improving performance
Team performance can be increased by ensuring that:

- tasks are clearly defined
- targets and timetables are established and adhered to
- set goals are achievable

The team members should all know exactly:
- why the task has to be tackled
- what result is expected
- what is to be achieved

Progress should be reviewed periodically to ensure the new work groups are heading in the right direction.   Management can be supportive by providing feedback, encouragement, showing interest in individual's opinions and challenging the group to solve problems and ineffective processes. Methods of achieving this include holding regular group meetings and setting up clear communications between the groups.   General staff meetings should be scheduled at regular intervals; for example every eight weeks.

Clarifying the job role and expectations
It is important to ensure everyone understands what is expected of them. Within the first six to twelve months all general staff should have up-to-date position descriptions. This can be a long process if new jobs have been created but is essential for staff to have a clear understanding of their role.

Establishment of personal performance objectives
Personal performance objectives allow employees to monitor their own outputs and provide a monitoring tool for management. It also allows staff to build up a sense of pride about what they are doing. Following the establishment of position descriptions each staff member should undergo a performance management session.

Performance management can be described as "an ongoing process of defining work goals and standards, monitoring actual performance against these and ensuring that the best outcome is achieved for all participants.   Performance management is not necessarily a one-to-one process between a staff member and his or her supervisor. Teams may be involved in the process of establishing performance expectations.   The important point is that every work area will need to establish the exact form of performance management which is appropriate for their area" [4]

Feedback
There are two elements of workplace feedback that should be considered, especially in the context of forming new work groups.

- Having the right materials, equipment and procedures and obtaining appropriate feedback

at regular intervals to determine how the activity is proceeding is essential to reach goals.

- Feedback is an indicator to the team that their goals, direction and results are shared by management. "If a job provides feedback an employee will know how effectively he or she is performing" [3, 263].

Regular feedback to the groups by way of scheduled meetings and casual discussion is important. In addition to this the Head of School and general staff manager should interact with the new work areas and groups to show support as often as is practical.

Development needs

These can take two forms – personal development and development of a structure within the organisation. An increase in productivity relies on many factors, with one of the most important being improved communication processes within and between all areas.
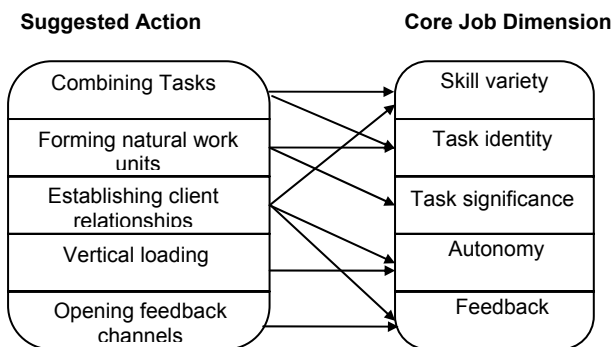
Introducing change

When introducing change to the workplace it is important to consider the following points:

- Skill variety and task significance, when combined create meaningful work.
- A degree of autonomy within jobs (at all levels) allows an individual the feeling of responsibility
- Feedback enables the employee to know how he or she is performing
- When the above three factors are present the employee will show greater motivation, performance and satisfaction.

These points can be summarised in the Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Guidelines for Job Redesign

Suggested Action	Core Job Dimension
Combining Tasks	Skill variety
Forming natural work units	Task identity
Establishing client relationships	Task significance
Vertical loading	Autonomy
Opening feedback channels	Feedback

After Robbins [266, 1988]

REVIEW SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES

In addition to forming coherent work groups the success of a merger also depends on the provision of an efficient and well defined set of systems and procedures. During the mergers I was involved in there was a systematic review of administrative and technical procedures in all the support areas. The review is an ongoing, dynamic process with modifications and additions along the way and should involve the relevant general and academic staff to assist in the development.

Examples of systems and process needing review might include asset management, purchasing, occupational health and safety, casual staff administration, computing support and financial transactions. When four schools combine you are faced with four systems or approaches to the same thing. Assess and evaluate the most efficient and appropriate method, adjust or develop a new process, seek feedback from the users (most likely academic staff or students) and then implement it. Ideally this should be done early; within the first twelve months of a merger or as soon as practical. A clear set of guidelines should be produced to assist all members of the new organisational unit know who to contact and where to go for information.

DEVELOP A NEW WEBSITE EARLY

An extremely successful method of distributing new processes and guidelines is via a staff intranet. This is the place where new and updated information about process can be placed. Complete with a quick reference guide of who-does-what in the support areas it can include local policy, induction information and links to corporate and other relevant information. Developing a new combined website early will assist in communicating to all members of staff.

CONCLUSION

The School of Health Sciences at the University of South Australia is now eighteen months down the track from its merger in January 2003. A general staff forum was held in June, six months after combining, and systems and processes were reviewed between May and October the same year. The outcomes from the forum assisted in ascertaining how the work groups would interact better and issues were identified that needed to be addressed to make it easier to work better. Subsequent teams were formed to support the School's requirements.

In September 2003 a combined website was created and a secure staff intranet released. Revised systems and processes were placed in a succinct format on the intranet and are still being added to and updated regularly.

Members of some of the work groups have changed over the past twelve months as the School is still establishing the most appropriate support required in each area. This has been one of the most challenging issues to deal with – finding the right person for the job, or similarly, finding the right job for the person.

To effectively meet the challenge of forming a motivated, effective and happy group of general staff, there are a number of steps that can be taken. The most important factor is that the process of change and is demonstrated as a fair and transparent process.

A SUGGESTED APPROACH

Short term – first six to twelve months

- Identify key support areas based on the needs of the newly formed organisational unit
- Hold a general staff forum to learn how people will interact and what natural work groups may form meet the unit's support needs. Use this as an opportunity to learn about each other and identify what issues need to be considered in order for the group to work better
- Schedule regular meetings and seek feedback; provide feedback
- Determine a balance between motivated and acquired abilities. Allow for relevant additional training if required
- Develop systems and minimum performance standards and communicate them to all staff
- Develop and implement an effective communication tool – staff intranet works well

Long term – beyond twelve months
- Increase the level of feedback and reinforce the importance of the individual and their task. Feedback should be weighted positively to assist in staff development
- Use project based methods such as Gantt charts and flow diagrams to assist in forward planning. This will enable management and work teams to continually monitor and update their systems of work as required
- Allow teams and individuals to partake in self-assessment with the aim of increasing performance and efficiency.
- Establish effective ongoing monitoring programs to maintain effective working relationships with employees and customers (internal and external)

With increased pressure from decreasing funding and increasing costs there is no certainty that things will remain the same for long. There is truth in the saying that the one thing that seems to be constant these days is change. Pressure is being placed on academic programs to consolidate courses with small student numbers, combine first year teaching units across disciplines and increase student/staff ratios. This, combined with merging academic organisational units, creates a dynamic and often confusing working environment. Applying some smart thinking and clear strategies to these issues will assist in meeting the challenge and making sure that staff are at least ready to find a chair when the music stops playing.

REFERENCES

[1] Bartol, K, Martin, D, Tein, M. and Matthews, G. [1998] *Management - A Pacific Rim Focus,* 2nd ed. McGraw Hill.

[2] Kezsbom, D. [1990] *"Are you really ready to build a project team?"* Industrial Engineering 22 [10, P51]

[3] Robbins, S.P, [1988] *Management - Concepts and Applications*, 2nd ed. Prentice Hall

[4] The University of South Australia *Performance Management Guidelines* [current 2004] [P3]

[5] Skopec, E, Smith, D. [1997] *the Practical Executive and team Building* NTC business Books

[6] Stott, K, Walker, A. [1995] *Teamwork and Team Building* Prentice Hall

[7] Quick, T.L, [1992] *Successful Team Building,* AMACOM

APPENDIX 1: A SUGGESTED STAFF FORUM AGENDA

Pre-determine the categories and stick up headings on the wall before the forum

12.00pm   Pin up issues under appropriate headings that they've brought with them

12.20pm   Lunch

Ice breaker – name 3 things - your name, what you do in you job and one thing you haven't told anyone else at work about before - allow 2 mins per person MAX!

1.00pm   Introduction to the workshop and the context of why we are holding it

Describe the process of writing more issues (in addition to the ones they have brought to the forum) per post-it note and placing them under the headings around the room

1.15pm   Identify the issues – use post-it notes and pencils, walk around the room as an individual and place issues under the headings

1.35pm   Encourage people time to browse all issues that have been stuck onto the wall and the ones brought to the workshop

1.50pm   Put people into predetermined discussion groups and allocate two headings per group to sit and discuss solutions to some of the issues. Groups to write up outcomes on butcher's paper

2.45pm   Afternoon tea

3.00pm   Group outcomes – call for person from each group to go through their lists. Open discussion

3.45pm   Close – outline where we go from here.