Having the Hard Conversations: Communication Skills Seminar for Beginning and Future Managers

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Motivation
- As graduate students and postdocs, we receive minimal formal training in management
- Upon graduation, however, we are expected to join the workforce and serve in managerial roles which we are not experienced in navigating.
- Our lack of experience in management leads to additional stress as we transition to management positions, and our inexperience may be detrimental to future employees.

Project Goal
In order to address the lack of training graduate students and postdocs receive in management, my project focused on developing a seminar to teach skills for identifying and navigating hard conversations when transitioning to a managerial role.

Seminar Details
- Worked in collaboration with Dana Hinojosa, Acting Interim Director of the Office of the Ombuds, and Lindsey Dunning, Associate Ombuds.
- The Ombuds had previously developed a seminar on negotiating difficult conversations.
- I assisted in adapting the seminar for graduate students and postdocs, writing new scenarios, and organizing the event.

Topics Covered
- Goals of the seminar
  - Recognize conflict red flags
  - Understand individual conflict styles and recognize those of others
  - Learn communication styles to navigate conflict
  - Role playing of a conflict scenario from the viewpoints of two individuals involved.
- Two well-received tools by attendees were:
  - Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Styles
  - SCARF: method for identifying areas of possible collaboration between conflicting parties:
    - Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, Fairness

Feedback
- 59 attendees registered, 40 attended.
- 29 of 40 attendees provided feedback following the seminar.
- Feedback was overwhelmingly positive – all 29 respondents would recommend the seminar to colleagues.
- Majority of attendees suggested that future seminars should be the same length or longer.
  - However, many acknowledged the difficulty of scheduling future seminars around graduate student and postdoc time constraints.
  - Common suggestion was to separate the workshop into two longer halves, or to have a half-day workshop once per quarter.
- A need for cross-cultural differences in conflict resolution was raised – possible additional seminar topic.
- Suggested as valuable training during welcome week for incoming graduate students.
- Attendees were eager for additional scenario studies – the most popular request was for more practice navigating difficult conversations.
- A few attendees requested additional information on managing their manager.

Future Plans
- Given the positive feedback and numerous requests for additional seminars, the Office of the Ombuds and I are in the beginning stages of scheduling this seminar for the 2019-2020 academic year.
- Sessions will likely be offered at least twice next year, with the first planned seminar for early in the Fall Quarter.
- Long-term Goal: Have this seminar become a standard offering of Grad Pathways and the Office of the Ombuds.
- I will work with the Office of the Ombuds to reformat the workshop to be more adaptable to a variety of schedules.

Special Thanks
- Dana Hinojosa, Acting Interim Director of the Office of the Ombuds, and Lindsey Dunning, Associate Ombuds, who were extremely generous with their time and in adapting this seminar for graduate students and postdocs.
- Teresa Dillinger and Ellen Hartigan O’Connor, who organized PFTF this year and helped me numerous times with getting this seminar going.
- My fellow PFTF cohort, from whom I learned a great deal over the year-long fellowship.
- My husband, family, and advisor for all of their support.

Attendees learned how to identify conflicts…

…were given tools to deal with emotionally charged situations…

…and applied their new skillset to a potentially high-conflict scenario.