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Fishing for Leadership: A Service Philosophy in Library Technical Services

One of the challenges of academic library technical services departments is trying to fit in. The idea of customer service and public presence is not an automatic attitude as we try to link our involvement with the dynamics of user services. Sometimes we are fortunate to have windows surrounding us; other times our environment is basement level or totally removed from the main campus. Technical services operations are a bit mysterious to people outside library circles (sometimes within) as to what we really do. We infrequently surface in the public areas for any length of time. Too often we are perceived as dark shadows, quiet workers, constant advocates for rules, unidentifiable people in large, open areas. Sound familiar? If only people knew the real “us”—the shakers and movers of the universe as we know it!

The Department of Library Technical Services (DLTS) at Western Kentucky University is no different from other library operations that incorporate collections, serials, bibliographic access, systems, and student personnel. We sometimes suffer identify crises, we are overlooked in major

work flow issues, and we constantly strive to showcase how we engage students, increase learning opportunities, and provide quality resources, services, and systems. Now we also have a service philosophy which underscores our approach to work and relationships and one which was developed with and by the department personnel.

We have seven full-time faculty positions and the equivalent of fifteen full-time staff, and ten student assistants in a university that is by some accounts large, but certainly medium sized with an FTE of over 16,000. Like most university libraries we are moving from print to online resources and engaging in a variety of special projects to accommodate extending learning and often save money. Sure, we are the heart of the operation, the behind-the-scenes people, the ones who provide mysterious access to a host of materials, the department where people stray while searching for DVDs or the Circulation Desk with a polite query: Were you looking for someone or some thing in particular? We try very hard to market ourselves and increase visibility and viability, not only within the library but also to the University.

Several years ago in a department head workday session where all department heads on campus convene twice a year, the Provost mentioned a team building retreat with her administrative staff using the *FISH!* Video.¹ This idea caught my attention and thus began our departmental journey to develop a philosophy of customer service (DLTS FISHosophy). I became department head in late 2002, but had been in the department much longer than that. My curiosity about this service concept became an opportunity in my new position to reassess the department in terms of physical environment, individual positions, and overall management.

While the FISH! philosophy is evident in corporate, government, and other educational settings, the articles about applying it to academic libraries and technical services are scarce. In 2007, Carol Anne Chouteau and Mary Heinzman described their application for motivating student workers at O’Keefe Library, St. Ambrose University, in “Gone Fishing: Using the FISH! Business Model to Motivate Student Workers.”² The FISH! philosophy, as we chose to adapt it, succinctly states how we strive to accomplish work for the University under a general umbrella of statements patterned after the four statements in FISH!-- *Be There, Choose Your Attitude, Play, Make Their Day*. This process originated above and beyond our normal action planning throughout the year, but certainly dovetailed with the University and departmental strategic goals, which will be referred to later.

The plan unfolded once the academic year, beginning in September 2006 with a mandatory viewing of *FISH!* by all departmental faculty and staff. I did not make any comments so as not to influence thinking; everyone pondered the implications of the fish market employees, their narratives and how their business attitude and effort could apply to our work.

In October 2006, I held individual conferences during which each person presented three slips of paper reflecting “Positives/Strengths of My Position,” “Improvements/Weaknesses,” and “FISH! What Does It Mean to Me?” These meetings gave me a chance to check the “pulse” of the department, especially since we had been able to address the physical environment of the department in meaningful ways over three years through modest renovations from carpet to telephones—and with significant support from the dean.

After everyone had been interviewed, I grouped similar observations and shared with unit coordinators those comments specific to their respective areas (serials, bibliographic access, and acquisitions). As department head and coordinator of serials, my dual role unfolded, and I also noted general issues for the department (like more staff meetings since faculty have regular

monthly meetings and more direct communication with the staff rather than just “add-ons” or hearing news through faculty), the need for “marketing to others” what it is that we do, recognizing and rewarding positive achievements, and providing more internal learning/training sessions about the e-resources we acquire.

By January 2006, I had compiled individual responses into general groupings that fit the FISH! statements (and without names) and shared via email. I also added the suggestions made to improve departmental management.

During March each unit took a specific statement (like *Play, Be There*) around which to develop a workable departmental philosophy, based on the broad ideas generated, and mold it into a concept that fit us.

Finally, in May, we met as a department to review the statements, revise, and adopt our FISHosophy as illustrated on the business-size cards we had printed:

[Insert front and back sides of card]

Throughout 2006 and 2007, we had a Friday fish throwing and literally threw a stuffed fish (named Pete the Perch) to a different person until everyone had Pete on her/his desk for a week. At first the gathering was a bit awkward, but soon people were reminding me it was Friday morning fish-throwing time. Pete perched on that person’s desk for a week--until the next throwing. We always gathered in the middle of the floor and shouted (in our best Pike Place Fish market voices), “Fish coming to Sara (or whoever would get it next), or “Fish on its way to John.”

We then placed Pete in a permanent, waterless fish bowl with lovely glass marbles , seaweed, and a castle relic, where he resides in the department lounge/meeting area. A placard in front of him has our philosophy brightly stated. Later, a companion joined him, as staff purchased another fish, and students named her “Chelsea.” Chelsea, unfortunately, is too big for the bowl, so she looks from the outside in.

We extended the philosophy (and fish) to our student assistants, as they are an essential part of our work and journey. One holiday our lounge/meeting area had a tree with fish decorations; another time students created a fish mobile with construction paper, and it hangs from the ceiling. So, with a departmental mission of “Creating Information Possibilities” and our FISHosophy, DLTS looks forward to accomplishing new and exciting things in a positive way for University Libraries.

This planning process fit with the University missions in the following ways:

“Encourage departmental personnel to acquire knowledge and improve skills through professional development, research and services opportunities” and “to improve access to resources, increase visibility and understanding of departmental responsibility, initiatives and place within University Libraries.”

We believe our philosophy enhances our responsiveness to whoever our constituents might be at any time and improves our overall effectiveness as a department by providing a work environment (both physical and human) that will meet individual and departmental needs in the 21st century.

Additionally, each person is challenged to achieve goals set through job performance evaluations. An evaluator’s task is much easier when expectations are fully grasped and created by everyone. Already we say “Bring a smile with you or don’t enter.” (Most days this works!)

Through processes like these we are constantly trying to fine tune and introduce improved work habits and a presence that will meet internal and external information needs for a changing and growing academic community. Our FISHosophy is the cornerstone of our customer service and the way we choose to spend most of our waking hours for “our journey IS our work together.” Each person has the power to choose a statement of the day, or several; as a department we have adopted a path and embarked on a journey that allows for constant reassessment for those not-so-good days and support in evaluation or correction of behaviors throughout the year. Seeing the actual fish market place that created this whole enterprise is a truly fun experience. When the American Library Association’s midwinter meeting convened in Seattle, the fish market was my primary goal outside of meetings, and the visit brought me full circle in this leadership process.

¹ *Fish!: catch the energy, release the potential!* produced and distributed by ChartHouse International Learning Corporation; producer & director, John Christensen, 2002.

² *Technical Services Quarterly* 24, no.3 (2007): 41-49.