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What Works? What Doesn't Work? What Action Can we Take?

Jennifer Hughes
Coastal Carolina University

Michelle Lewis
Coastal Carolina University

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Abstract

This session demonstrated an effective and engaging exercise that empowers library staff to take action! Participants learned how to lead library strategic planning processes, change implementation, and assessment activities in a welcoming, non-intimidating manner that fosters an environment of ongoing collaboration, solutions-based results, reflection, and improvement.

Keywords

assessment, strategic planning, team building, management, leadership

Introduction

To meet the ever-changing needs of users, libraries must constantly look for ways to refine the overall patron experience. "What Works? What Doesn't Work? and What Action Can We Take?" is an effective three-phase exercise for leading a team through change while developing staff buy-in through open communication. This approach creates an environment that will foster ongoing collaborative, solutions-based planning and assessment, as well as provide a direction for improvement.

Discussion

Beginning with the "What Works?" segment of the exercise, someone is designated to record and display responses as employees share positive feedback about the library's **success**. Leading with a lively, active discussion about the successes sets a tone of celebration for the library staff's accomplishments. It establishes an environment that feels safe and comfortable for employees to share their thoughts and ideas in an encouraging and enthusiastic manner.

During the next phase, comments about "What Doesn't Work?" are also recorded. By focusing on concerns directly related to the library functions, resources, and services (not people), staff are less likely to feel threatened or defensive. Quickly soliciting responses without allowing in-depth discussion about any specific item during this phase ensures that it is an inclusive activity that encourages participation from everyone, without judgment.

The last phase is "What Action Can We Take?" This is the time when the group reviews the comprehensive list of "What Doesn't Work?" items and collaboratively discusses the scalability and validity of each issue. After the list is edited to only include items that are actionable, the group works together to brainstorm solutions for how to fix the problems including delegating the responsible parties and providing a timeline for completion. The results of "What Action Can We Take?" become a planning document for staff to refer to for departmental and individual priorities and assignments.

Staff appreciate the opportunity to voice their concerns in a safe environment knowing that management and colleagues hear their concerns and either share rationale for why something is the way it is or help develop solutions for how to change it. When assigned tasks during "What Action Do We Take?" staff workloads become more meaningful. Individual contributions to "What Works? What Doesn't Work? and What Action Can We Take?" collectively result in transparency in decision-making, dynamic outcomes, and ownership of the library's success. Furthermore, front-line staff can see their direct contributions to assessment and strategic planning activities through these exercises.

When performed routinely the "What Works?" and "What Doesn't Work?" sessions allow staff to reflect on the effectiveness of changes that have been implemented and provide the foundation for a cycle of departmental planning and assessment. As the results of these exercises are paired with library statistics and data, the concept of "assessment" changes from an intimidating theory to an actual practice that makes sense to library employees. It becomes evident that the changes implemented at the library as a result of "What Action Can We Take?" has an effect on library usage and/or satisfaction during the next cycle of "What Works?" or "What Doesn't Work?".

It can be a big undertaking to track changes in library usage, identify issues, create solutions, develop a timeline for implementation, and assess the effectiveness of change while providing real-time library services. Through these exercises, library staff are empowered to suggest new ideas and then are tasked with revisiting the changes to assess the success of those changes. If the change is successful, it is easily celebrated during a future "What Works?" session. However, even if the change is deemed unsuccessful or creates unforeseen issues that are identified in future "What Doesn't Work?" exercises, the opportunity to try new approaches creates a culture of innovation throughout the library.

Conclusion

The “What Works? What Doesn’t Work? What Action Can We Take?” exercises allow all library employees to participate in the process of prioritizing and implementing necessary changes in the library that allow the library to stay relevant in today’s ever-changing landscape.