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Faculty Perceptions of Communication at an Academic Medical Center: A Faculty Forward Qualitative Analysis

Brian L. Rutledge

University of Mississippi Medical Center, brutledge@umc.edu

Jessica H. Bailey

University of Mississippi Medical Center, jhbailey@umc.edu

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to examine the faculty's suggestions on how to improve communication at five schools in an academic medical center. The University of Mississippi Medical Center facilitated the administration of the Faculty Forward Engagement Survey by the Association of American Medical Colleges to faculty in the schools of medicine, nursing, dentistry, pharmacy, and health related professions. This survey included open-ended questions with narrative responses. On these responses to one question about communication, the authors performed the constant comparative method of grounded theory design, a foundational form of qualitative inquiry. In reviewing and coding the 201 responses, we identified recurring concepts, developed and confirmed codes, then discussed and condensed three major themes. The responses suggesting improvement in communication fell into three categories: 1. Access (to institutional leadership, dean, chair, and faculty peers); 2. Characteristics (quantity, quality, and content of communication); 3. Transparency (the "why" and "how" of decision-making, and doing what you say you will do). Because we found through the literature review that communication with and among faculty is a significant determinant of faculty satisfaction and retention, these three categories inform short-term decision making and communication improvements, but also define the area for future investigation.

Keywords

Qualitative, Faculty Forward, Communication

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Faculty Perceptions of Communication at an Academic Medical Center: A Faculty Forward Qualitative Analysis

Brian L. Rutledge and Jessica H. Bailey

University of Mississippi Medical Center, Jackson, Mississippi, USA

The purpose of the study is to examine the faculty's suggestions on how to improve communication at five schools in an academic medical center. The University of Mississippi Medical Center facilitated the administration of the Faculty Forward Engagement Survey by the Association of American Medical Colleges to faculty in the schools of medicine, nursing, dentistry, pharmacy, and health related professions. This survey included open-ended questions with narrative responses. On these responses to one question about communication, the authors performed the constant comparative method of grounded theory design, a foundational form of qualitative inquiry. In reviewing and coding the 201 responses, we identified recurring concepts, developed and confirmed codes, then discussed and condensed three major themes. The responses suggesting improvement in communication fell into three categories: 1. Access (to institutional leadership, dean, chair, and faculty peers); 2. Characteristics (quantity, quality, and content of communication); 3. Transparency (the "why" and "how" of decision-making, and doing what you say you will do). Because we found through the literature review that communication with and among faculty is a significant determinant of faculty satisfaction and retention, these three categories inform short-term decision making and communication improvements, but also define the area for future investigation. Keywords: Qualitative, Faculty Forward, Communication

Background

The University of Mississippi Medical Center facilitated the administration of the Faculty Forward Engagement Survey by the Association of American Medical Colleges to faculty in the schools of medicine, nursing, dentistry, pharmacy, and health related professions. Our goals for this voluntary survey were to evaluate faculty culture, policies related to faculty, and faculty engagement and satisfaction, which was also the intent of the survey (Brubaker et al., 2013). The survey tool included questions with narrative responses and for this qualitative study, we analyzed the responses to, "How could communication with faculty be improved?"

We were unable to locate any publication of a qualitative analysis of the Faculty Forward survey narrative data to date, nor any research based upon data from a Faculty Forward survey administration to multiple schools at an academic medical center. Therefore, we feel this work contributed uniquely to the knowledge base about improving communication with and among faculty across multiple schools at an academic medical center, and provided this contribution from a richness of data in the narrative feedback from faculty, not just from the quantitative results of the survey.

Review of the Literature

Though some suggest that a full, traditional literature review prior to data analysis in qualitative research does not make sense, it is still important to draw on others' relevant work

in order to present justification for any research (Becker & Richards, 2007). A “when-and-as-needed” literature review is better suited to directly support the most important themes that emerge from qualitative data analysis, and that is the method that we employed here (Wolcott, 2009).

The thorough and current review of the literature based on the themes that emerged from this qualitative analysis showed that communication with and among faculty is a significant determinant of faculty satisfaction. On the Faculty Forward Engagement Survey itself, faculty at multiple institutions previously expressed dissatisfaction with communication (Wai, Dandar, Radosevich, Brubaker, & Kuo, 2014). A culture of open communication, including opportunities for faculty input, contributes to faculty satisfaction (Bunton et al., 2012), and communication directly contributes to workplace desirability (Wai et al., 2014). Faculty dissatisfaction with communication is a major predictor of faculty leaving academic careers (Bucklin, Valley, Welch, Tran, & Lowenstein, 2014; Demmy, Kivlahan, Stone, Teague, & Sapienza, 2002; Lowenstein, Fernandez, & Crane, 2007). In one study, dissatisfaction with communication was found to be the *best* predictor of faculty leaving an institution (Demmy et al., 2002).

As important as and directly tied to faculty satisfaction is faculty retention. Recent reports of faculty attrition rates (Pollart et al., 2015) have been alarming, with 50% leaving their institution and 80% of those leaving an academic career altogether over a 10-year period (Alexander & Lang, 2008; Corrice, Fox, & Bunton, 2011). Communication is pivotal to faculty satisfaction with their workplace and their intentions to stay in the institution.

Our literature review also suggested some ways to improve communication with and among faculty (e.g., town halls, small group meetings with leadership). Communication via town halls and structured conversations promotes a sense of openness and shared governance that promotes recruitment, retention, and transparency (Bunton et al., 2012), and good communication supports the transparency that is so necessary for faculty satisfaction (Cohn, Bethancourt, & Simington, 2009).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine faculty perceptions of how we could improve communication at one academic medical center with six schools on its campus.

Context

We as researchers and authors primarily share a commitment to interprofessional collaboration and a mutual interest in qualitative research. Dr. Bailey is the Dean of the School of Health Related Professions and holds a faculty appointment in the School of Medicine. Dr. Rutledge is chief of staff to the vice chancellor (i.e., institutional CEO) and dean of the School of Medicine, and holds a faculty appointment in the School of Health Related Professions. As dean, Dr. Bailey’s interest in improving communication with faculty is clear, and as chief of staff, Dr. Rutledge can guide and influence our institution’s leader to create a culture of communication based on the results of this research. Finally, as one of the first institutions to administer the Faculty Forward survey to other schools beyond the School of Medicine, we thought it was particularly important to collaborate on research that could provide outcomes that could translate across all schools on our campus as well as to other institutions.

Method

We began our research after we received an exemption from the University of Mississippi Medical Center Institutional Review Board.

The data for this study came from the Faculty Forward Engagement Survey, which is an optional service offered by the Association of American Medical Colleges to provide a tool for schools to measure the engagement and retention intentions of faculty (Wai et al., 2014). The University of Mississippi Medical Center facilitates the administration of the Faculty Forward Engagement Survey on a voluntary basis via an online survey that consists primarily of multiple-choice questions but also provides open-ended questions, including additional questions that can be chosen by the institution. For this study, we selected the narrative responses to one such custom question: "How could communication with faculty be improved?"

The participants in the survey were full-time and part-time faculty in the schools of medicine, nursing, dentistry, pharmacy, and health related professions at the University of Mississippi Medical Center during the 2014-2015 administrations of the Faculty Forward Engagement Survey. We note that the survey administration to faculty in the school of medicine occurred in fall 2014 and in the schools of dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, and health related professions in spring 2015, but we combined the data for analysis.

Across all schools, 1,112 faculty received the survey, 830 responded, 262 provided narrative feedback to the question selected for this research, and we analyzed 201 (there were 61 responses that were marked "not applicable" or equivalent).

We chose a grounded theory design for this research. This form of qualitative inquiry provided a framework that focuses on the significance of interpretation and meaning in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 2011). We then employed the constant comparative method to analyze the data, which was a method well suited and appropriate to this type of research (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990). We were careful to carry out the analysis in the following step-wise fashion, and to support individual findings with mutual consensus, to ensure credibility, rigor, trustworthiness, and to guard against bias.

Executing the constant comparative method, we read each response line-by-line and completed the analysis in four steps. In step one we independently identified recurring concepts. In step two, we compared our individual analyses and the emerging concepts, and mutually developed initial codes for categories. In step three, we individually re-analyzed the data to determine if initial codes held true. Finally, in step four, we together discussed and condensed our categories. We did this by reviewing the data grouped into each category and discussing each similarity and difference to another category, and mutually determining whether the category under consideration could be grouped with another while maintaining the integrity of the data. After completing this process together, three major themes emerged.

Results

Of the 201 narrative responses analyzed, some indicated that faculty thought communication was good or adequate in its current state. However, since our intent was to analyze suggestions to improve communication and because a majority of the responses did suggest improvements, our results focus on the three major themes that answer the question, "How could communication with faculty be improved?"

Access

The summary of this theme is the statement, “Communication could be improved by having more access to institutional leadership, my dean, my chair, and my faculty peers.” Some representative excerpts follow:

“More face-to-face interaction with leadership.” (Many of the comments in this area encouraged face-to-face interaction rather than electronic or other communication.)

“Have chair interact with faculty during clinical activities.” (Some of the comments suggested that in-person interactions occur in the setting where the faculty members spends the most time. For example, for a clinician, it was suggested that communication with leadership best occurs in the clinical setting.)

“Instead of relying on mass emails, make sure that department chairs are communicating directly with faculty.” (Like many of the other comments, this excerpt represents those comments that encourage face-to-face, direct communication, but is distinct because it represents the many comments that focus on the department chair as the preferred source of communication.)

The suggestions for improvement centered around in-person, face-to-face contact in the form of small and large group meetings, social activities, town halls, and more participation in shared faculty facilities, such as the faculty dining room.

Characteristics

The summary of this theme is the statement, “Communication could be improved by increasing the amount, decreasing the amount, improving the quality, or changing the content of existing communication.” This theme is apparent in the following representative excerpts:

“More frequent faculty meetings.” Or “We actually have too many meetings.” (These excerpts represent those comments that indicate a change in the frequency of meetings would be an improvement.)

“More specific statements from leaders and less generality.” (This excerpt represents the comments that indicate a need for the change in content of communication from leadership.)

“Email communication is the best way, just make them relevant to the recipients.” (This excerpt is distinct because it represents those comments that suggest that although the medium may be appropriate for communication, the careful and purposeful selection of recipients is also an important opportunity for improvement.)

Though there were some specific suggestions for improvement that were broadly applicable, some responses made suggestions that then contradicted by another, especially in terms of quantity of communication. The message was clear that faculty members prefer different styles of communication, though all prefer communication that is both adequate in frequency and relevant to them.

Transparency

The summary of this theme is the statement, “Communication could be improved by communicating to us why and how decisions are made that affect us, and also by doing what you say you will do.” The excerpts that follow illustrate this theme:

“More transparency in decisions that affect faculty would be helpful.” (This excerpt represents those comments which suggest transparency (i.e., why and how decisions are made) as the primary opportunity for improvement.

“The communication itself isn't the problem; it's that the things that have been communicated haven't been delivered.” (This excerpt represents those comments which

suggest that although communication may be effective, following through on the content (i.e., “do what you say you will do”) is as important as the communication itself.)

We felt that grouping responses that explicitly mentioned transparency with the “do what you say you will do” responses into one theme made sense because most of the latter seemed to be *due to* a lack of transparency. Responses indicate there was a strong belief that increasing transparency would solve some of the communication gaps between what leadership says and does (institutional leadership, dean, and chair).

Discussion

The results of our study suggest faculty believe there is great value in face-to-face interaction with institutional leadership. Interestingly, with technology at our fingertips, there is still an obvious desire for personal communication among the faculty who chose to respond to this question. Faculty respondents were interested in more in-person communication in both formal meetings and informal social gatherings. Faculty have a desire for more direct access to administrative leaders, rather than receiving information through a middle-level manager or supervisors.

We also learned that faculty have definite ideas about the content of communication and how communication looks and feels. Although responses in the theme of “characteristics of communication” were sometimes contradictory, it was apparent that responding faculty members expect relevancy in the content of communication and consistency in the timing of communication. This particular finding may be a reflection of the necessity for just-in-time information dictated by the fast-paced activities of faculty members’ daily schedules. They want to know what they need to know when they need to know it but do not want to waste time on irrelevant information, just for the sake of communicating.

Perhaps the most interesting and most dynamic finding was the perception of respondents that transparency was missing in the interaction between administration and faculty. The word “transparency” appeared often in respondents’ comments and the tone of some of the comments regarding transparency indicated a frustration among those who held a perception of a disingenuous pattern of behaviors that hindered communication. Faculty dissatisfaction related to lack of transparency is not a new concept to previously reported findings from Faculty Forward Engagement Survey data. Findings from surgical faculty at 14 medical schools revealed dissatisfaction with communication in terms of transparency (Wai et al., 2014). Bunton et al. (2012) also reported the perception by faculty of inconsistency between stated institutional missions and administrative decisions that gave momentum to actions taken.

Limitations

Of course, the primary limitation of this study is that the results reflect faculty perceptions of communication at a single academic medical center, and grounded theory is not intended to always produce generalizable results (Charmaz, 2006). Another potential limitation is that the “not applicable” responses excluded from analysis could have actually held meaning, though since the data were de-identified, there was no way to investigate further.

Implications

There is a large number of articles about the cost of faculty turnover in academic health science centers (AHC) and the intrinsic value of retaining faculty (Demmy et al., 2002; Lowenstein et al., 2007). Striving to maintain a culture of satisfied faculty is crucial to the

success of a complex organization like an AHC. Bunton et al. (2012) proposed that faculty satisfaction is dependent upon a culture open to consideration of faculty opinions, which in turn make faculty feel valued by the institution. Faculty emphasized the importance of shared governance and shared decision making in the findings by Lowenstein (Lowenstein et al., 2007).

We believe there is a congruence between the themes of “access” and “transparency.” The potential for a relationship between these themes certainly deserves a more in-depth investigation. Is the desire for more access to leadership rooted in the belief that dissonance exists between what administration purports to be important and what they are actually doing? Could this be the resounding issue behind the theme of a need for transparency? Is this a reflection of a desire by faculty to participate in more shared governance? What does the concept of self-governance look like on an entire campus vs school by school? What if some schools on campus are engaging in more self-governance than others? How does that shape the effort to be more transparent or to promote self-governance?

Significance

The literature review showed that communication with and among faculty is a significant determinant of faculty satisfaction and retention, and its improvement can have real and significant effects (Lowenstein et al., 2007). We feel the results of this analysis are now available as tool for motivating and supporting visible communication from institutional leadership, making clear a shared institutional vision and mission, and a concerted effort to provide relevant and timely communication consistently.

Future Investigations

The natural next step for further investigation would be to repeat this analysis based on data from the most recent administration of the Faculty Forward Engagement Survey, the results of which are still pending. Opportunities for further research exist to assess the generalizability of the themes identified for improving communication with and among faculty. Of particular interest would be comparing findings with those of other institutions to determine if they are specific to local or regional cultures, or some other factor(s).

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Author Note

Brian L. Rutledge, Ph.D., is Chief of Staff and Assistant Professor of Health Sciences, with the University of Mississippi Medical Center. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: brutledge@umc.edu.

Jessica H. Bailey, Ph.D. is Dean of the School of Health Related Professions, and Professor of Health Sciences with the University of Mississippi Medical Center. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: jhbailey@umc.edu.

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