Defining Jobs - The New Way?

Recently, I discussed with a group of family and friends the subject of promotions at work. We were a mixed group; three HR practitioners, a finance manager, a systems engineer, a preschool teacher, a university development officer, and four assorted academic administrative managers.

Our dinner that night was celebratory -- the teacher and engineer had recently been promoted to senior positions, to head teacher and VP of engineered systems design. The non-HR folks assumed that their promotions were expected and achieved in some progressive system, assuming that these positions would "track" in a hierarchical pattern. As our conversation continued, it became obvious that if there were indeed criteria for the promotions, guidelines for career tracks, or simple job progression charts, they were not part of the process in either organization; no manager or department head had defined, outlined, or referred to any such system when announcing the good news.

This is not to say that these mechanisms do not exist; rather, it appeared to us (and felt to those promoted) that career tracks, formal evaluative processes, and tenure or length of service were not the driving criteria for the advancement. Rather, in these two cases, what seemed to happen might signal the emergence of a more opportunistic model of career advancement. In both cases, managers were relying on the observation of tangible results in a short window of time (one teaching year, and one major project cycle respectively). They pointed to those accomplishments and then added positive comments about attitude, collaboration, and good humor. Both managers noted the excellent reputation of the individual among peers and colleagues. The teacher got a formal written review; the engineer got a couple of beers after work.

The conversation made me wonder about the integrity of the system (if a formal one exists), the clarity of the process within the working organization, and the effectiveness of the compensation programs in place. I wonder whether the challenges of the past two years have led us to work outside formal tracking in order to provide reward and recognition more quickly. Or, perhaps the recent economic stress simply shone light on the fact that most of our compensation programs, position management systems, and career tracking mechanisms are decades old -- outdated and unable to flex for today's staffing dynamics?

The next morning, I found an interesting article in the June issue of Harvard Business Review.[1] These authors encourage workers to reconfigure the "building blocks" of a job to create "more engaging and fulfilling experiences at work." The thought of people empowered to expand, add breadth and depth, or take on more accountability in their jobs may either trouble or excite us, but we should be aware that along with the cultural issues of trust and loyalty that have been demanding our attention, the mechanics of maintaining the systems that define relative value and contribution within our organizations has or will shift the sand on which we stand for some time to come.

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[1] Amy Wrzesniewski, Justin M. Berg, and Jane E. Dutton, *Turn the Job You Have into the Job You Want,* Harvard Business Review, June 2010

If you have reduced headcount for any reason, you know that there are workers dealing with additional tasks inherited from those who are gone. It struck me as I read the HBR article that in today's workplaces there is a great deal of reconfiguring going on, not all of it voluntary or cheerfully undertaken. If jobs have changed, it is more likely to hear that tasks have been added and responsibilities shifted rather than that work has been enriched because of skill, interest or recognition.

When the duties of a job are expanded and there is no accompanying addition of accountability or authority, resentment is not far behind. The hierarchical nature of academic administration has challenged us for years to find creative ways in which to enrich work experience and expand the scope of jobs that are likely to exist in their present content for some time to come. (Last fall, we looked at the resulting "creep" in administrative titles that many of us have faced.)

So, is it constructive for people to take apart and rebuild their jobs? I believe that we need to find a way to create the framework within which this is encouraged, while keeping our constraining systems in mind. Many of us have been admirably able to conduct business as usual, and are proud of our ability to reward and recognize staff during a period of upheaval and uncertainty. But there are variables that influence whether or not we "go places" at work, and for others of us, these variables have been constraints that might seem insurmountable.

First, whether or not a job has changed, we are bound by budgets that allow for a certain number of FTE, a certain number of defined positions, or a bottom line salary amount that cannot be negotiated. If a promotion for a valuable staff member was not in the approved budget, winning the argument for its addition might be impossible.

Also, many of us are still bound and chafed by compensation systems built on job descriptions, job families, or pay grades that were designed and defined decades ago. They often bear little resemblance to our real work as it has evolved, particularly in the past couple of years. Yet the last thing most of us have the time or the stomach to do is redesign comp systems. We retrofit what we are doing into the system for the sake of expedience.

Yet another variable with significant and often overlooked impact is the fact that there are components of administrative work that will not soon change. Phones must be answered, files must be maintained, meetings must be planned, events coordinated, and communications managed. It is always difficult to relay the decision that the title and/or compensation of a particularly valuable administrative assistant will not change because the work can not be changed. If budgets are fixed and FTE counts are rigid, you have the classic example of a worker who feels – and arguably is – stuck to the floor.

Although "clerical" has become a dated word, the bulk of this work will always be less exciting to the new generation of workers than that of planning, design, research, or managing people, programs grants and projects. More and more, we read about Department of Labor investigations into job exemption status; it is possible that this focus will lead us back to more rigid definitions of this work.

So, assuming a robust and well-used performance feedback system exists, how do we find the resources and the capability to allow for the changes that high performing workers tell us again and again they want and expect? As one HR Director said, "… most systems have some flex in them; the trick is to find the soft spots and work them into solutions." Success in these actions will depend upon our creativity and willingness to reconfigure (or – frankly and shamelessly – to work around)

systems that were built with little flexibility at a time when managing knowledge was the purview of the few who had access to it.

Will your institution support a "formal" written set of job descriptions and at the same time allow you to use informal and locally meaningful definitions as well? This seems to be one of the most viable solutions to the "ancient system" syndrome. For example, grants managers in a research institution might redefine the Financial Manager compensation track to include specific grant management responsibilities. So, Financial Manager I, II, and so on might contain room within each level for Grants Accountant, Grants Manager, Coordinator, etc. The three categories under each pay level definition need not be reported within the University's system because the "Financial Manager I, II or III title still applies, and because broad banded salary ranges allow ample room for compensation differentials.

Department administrators in one of our institutions launched a concerted effort to spread the clerical tasks among department members. They asked departments to come up with innovative ideas, and here are a few: filing parties in late afternoon, planning meetings and events over lunch, and asking as many administrators and faculty as possible to answer their own phones when they're in the office OR allow their assistants' recorded voices to switch on at the first ring. (Such a solution may not work where YOU are!)

One really innovative solution came from the HR staff at a small community college: Get departments together, explain the constraints, and ask them to help you break things down into manageable, allowable, and local "fixes" – revolutionary! They called the plan "Thou Shalt NOT – unless…." Sometimes nothing is more effective than naming the elephant in the room.

What about metrics and performance feedback? If we begin to build more flexible systems of compensation and advancement, how will we include these important factors?
There is no easy way to say this – maybe it is time to bite the bullet of redesigning major systems of compensation, pay scales, and position definitions. Of course, our public institutions face great challenges in this arena, but this may be one of those rare windows of opportunity for change. Both the HR expertise and breadth of experience within our institutions means we may be able to design systems internally. There are a number of resources that present clear guidelines. "Compensation", by Milkovich and Newman has been around for years, and happily was updated most recently in January 2010. [2]

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[2] George T. Milkovich, Jerry M. Newman, Barry Gerhart, COMPENSATION (tenth edition), The McGraw-Hill Companies, New York, NY, January 2010