

Cultural Transformation at Edison State Community College



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A Challenging Culture

In May 2011, I excitedly embraced my first presidency with Edison State Community College in Ohio. Previously, I had served as a Campus Provost in Minnesota. During this tenure, we had realized a good measure of success in developing a positive culture, so it was with confidence that I approached this new challenge.

Early in my presidency at Edison, two significant discoveries worked to define the early stages of my leadership. First, I learned that while my predecessor had many successes in his career, of late many were dissatisfied and disheartened with leadership, and an aura of both apathy and antagonism had recently filled the halls and classrooms of our small college. In recent years, Edison had definitely developed a “gotcha” culture. The staff was suspicious of management, management was leery of faculty and faculty appeared to distrust everyone.

At this same time I was introduced to a dynamic and unrelenting employee named Mona Walters. Ms. Walters was a former academic administrator and adjunct faculty member and was serving as the Dean of Institutional Planning and Effectiveness, and she had an opportunity for me as the new CEO. The concept of continuous quality improvement was not new to me but I had frankly never heard of the Continuous Quality Improvement Network (CQIN), a network of leaders, CEOs, and institutional effectiveness individuals who met annually to increase their knowledge of and work towards common annual thematic learning objectives. The notion both seemed to add clarity and confusion. Many in higher education have argued against running our colleges like a business, insisting on the purity of education for education’s sake. The concept of for-profit businesses serving as Learning Partners left with me with a gap in understanding the connection and utility. However, one of the Learning Partners for CQIN's 2011 Summer Institute was Disney, and the event was scheduled to take place in Orlando, so I thought, “we can handle Central Florida for a couple of days of learning”.

An Eye-Opening Experience

One of the learning objectives for that Summer Institute was “to discover specific Disney strategies and tactics that could be adapted by the members of CQIN in order to validate and enhance their respective operational excellence cultures.” If nothing else, we figured the opportunity to work with and learn from leaders at NASA, The Disney Institute, and City of Coral Springs, Florida (a Baldrige recipient) would make for an excellent professional development opportunity.

Our small team of four experienced far greater learning and results than we ever expected as we began to engage with our higher education colleagues from across the country to understand The Loyalty Profit Chain. The chain, based on research done by Ivy League School Professor Heskett brought greater meaning to the concept of Internal Service Quality: the notion that how an institution treats its employees and how employees engage with each other is a paramount determinant for organizational success and, subsequently, student success.

Peripherally I was aware that CQIN's Executive Committee team worked diligently to select annual learning themes, but this topic could not have been more appropriate for Edison and our CQIN team was enthusiastically determined to embed the precepts and tenets of Internal Service Quality into the transitioning culture at Edison. We adapted and modified the learning incentive concept of “critters”. At the Disney Institute, instructors used small Disney characters they described as “critters” as an incentive for participation. Learners earned a “critter” when they answered questions or participated in learning discourse.

A Cultural Shift

Equipped with these tools, we brought back a modified Edison Service and Sustainability Chain as a tool to improve student success and student outcomes. We presented competing concepts, such as Employee Productivity & Performance, Internal Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, Employee Satisfaction, and Superior Customer Value, among others, at an all-college meeting. We walked through Disney’s theory and bolstered the concepts with related academic publications.

We simplified the “critters” concept with the use of colored key rings and presented every employee with a carabiner to connect and collect their individual critters. After demonstrating the learning incentive of awarding critters, we pledged management’s commitment to improve internal service quality and challenged our institution do the same. We asked employees to stop the “gotcha” attitude and begin looking for the good things their colleagues were doing, to realize when a fellow employee was working on behalf of students and student success, to notice when others in the college that were going “above and beyond” in service and to call attention to individuals when they witnessed them making positive improvements. In short, we asked everyone employed at Edison to “Be the Strong Link” in our organization’s chain.



Edison's response was resoundingly positive and complete. Many employees displayed their carabiner and critters in their office areas, and several of the chains stretched in excess of two feet in length. A new tradition began at all-college meetings and impromptu gatherings. Employees would publically recognize colleagues for their great contributions to student success and present them with a new "critter". Most recipients would humbly note they were just doing their jobs. Both of these statements were, of course, correct.

Measurable Results

The biggest change at Edison was the realization, recognition, and ownership to the principles of student success and the opportunity to develop a strengths-based perspective through a shared definition of Internal Service Quality. This resulted in a shared vision of student success and focus on students meeting their goals, persisting, and graduating.

As a result of this initiative, we realized some amazing outcomes. In the first year, morale greatly improved; Edison employees exchanged nearly 2,500 "critters". In 2012-13 over 3,500 critters were awarded. In 2013-14 when the State of Ohio moved to a performance-based funding model, Edison received a 17% increase in funding due to our high levels of persistence and completion, experienced the State's second highest course completion mark, and ended the year with a completion (graduation and transfer) rate of 47%. All of these performance levels were all-time highs and, collectively, we realized our colleagues were the impetus for the improvement. Give that person a Critter!