

## Working Effectively with Staff

### Basics

- Learn about available resources and online materials. Your College personnel and the Human Resources Office are always available to help. Get to know the relevant individuals—a quick phone call to the right person can save you much time and effort down the road. Familiarize yourself with the *Virginia Tech Classified and University Employees Handbook*. Good websites are:  
<http://www.hr.vt.edu/>  
<http://www.hr.vt.edu/supervisorscorner/>  
<http://www.hr.vt.edu/employeescorner/policy/index.html>

### Working with the Staff You Inherit

- If you are new to the role as a department head or administrative leader, you have just inherited your entire department staff. If you are not new to this role—take time to consider and reflect on your interactions with your staff.
- Irrespective of whether you are hired from the outside or were appointed internally, tread lightly. Even if you know the department well, being head/chair gives you a new perspective and changes the expectations others have for you. Learn about the existing culture in the organization and among the staff, and gain input from many perspectives. You need the entire staff with you—not against you—if you are going to maximize effort, efficiency, and community and become the “best place to work on campus.”
- You should meet with each and every staff member soon to begin to build open and trusting communication. Remember—these people want to know who you are, how you walk and talk, where the department is going, how they fit in, and that you know their name and area of work expertise and responsibilities. You should do this for all staff, hard funded department staff, and soft money staff (with supervisor’s permission). Ask for their input on possible areas of concern, problems, conflicts, expectations, and how the department can improve—they are more vested than often given credit for. Never assume that the staff ‘don’t care’ or are not interested in broader department goals, directions, developments, etc. Staff should know your mission and where the unit is going.
- After careful study, and in an appropriate time frame, be willing to make necessary changes in work assignments, expectations, and processes. Communicate, communicate, and communicate so the changes are well understood. Provide necessary reassurances along the way. Don’t wait 3 years if you are new to the position to make changes that need to be made—you have an opportunity and an optimal window of change in the first 12 months.
- The words “All of us—including the Head!—are here to serve the students and the department faculty. How can we do this better? How can we improve?” will set a tone and define the purpose of everyone’s work. They also set the tone for your own work.
- Staff deserve respect and courtesy at all times. Virginia Tech’s “[Principles of Community](#)” define the broad framework. It is your job to fill in the specifics: How are staff approached with requests, what constitutes a reasonable request, and what language is appropriate in their presence? The staff will be looking to you for support and guidance, especially in their interactions with difficult individuals.

### Hiring New Staff On Your Watch

- Consult policy first before you begin. Don’t get caught out of bounds of policy and procedure. Both your College staff and Human Resources are there to help and advise.
- Get broad input from faculty and staff on real versus perceived department needs. Be willing to make changes in competencies of staff—plan for the future and consider other staff demographics (future retirements or changes). You don’t have unlimited opportunities for continuous hiring—

make the most of your opportunity. Your position description will guide you and will attract (or repel) potential applicants.

- Conduct a real search—there is a wealth of talent in the local pool and you want the best there is for each and every position in your department. Conduct a thorough interview—do background and reference check (never hire anyone without checking references via a phone call). Communicate the very highest expectation during the interview and see who steps up to the plate. Follow suggested policy on follow up with all applicants. Don't burn any bridges—remember you want to create the best place to work on campus and you may have future opportunities and want the second and third ranked candidates back in the pool.
- Once you make the hire, meet in the first week to discuss expectations, working hours, reporting, supervision, etc. Consider some type of staff orientation for new hires. Consider a top 10 list of do's and don'ts—you might be surprised how helpful this can be in the long run.
- Use the probationary period effectively—do a review as required. Don't live with a bad decision. After the probationary period mistakes are difficult—but not impossible—to correct.

### **Evaluating Staff**

- It is very important that staff evaluations are done in an effective and timely manner each year. Staff should feel that their supervisors and departmental-level reviewers have taken the time to truly consider their work, their strengths and important contributions, and their areas where improvement could occur. Don't "slop this together" at the last minute and submit it to Personnel Services. Do it right. Ask your staff for a (voluntary) self-assessment and consider supplemental written feedback in addition to the university-required forms. Make sure that other supervisors in your department also do a good job, to ensure equitable treatment of all staff members.
- Consider monthly or quarterly meetings, either with individuals or groups to check in on how things are going, what you can help with, what resources are needed. If your only contact during the year is a single formal evaluation session, this will feel uncomfortable to both you and the staff member.
- Provide written feedback if possible. Evaluation may include pay raises, and while the state has dictated staff raises for quite some time, there are opportunities in the system to tie special adjustments to excellent contributions.
  - In several colleges, in-band adjustments must be funded at the departmental level. Keep in mind that there is more than just the cost perspective: The morale and fairness perspective is at least equally important. Staff see faculty as having opportunities for advancement and special adjustments for a job well done. They are motivated by similar opportunities. You should find funding within the budget to do this for the long-term strength and vitality of the staff.
  - Some of your staff members will consult the publically available information about salary levels. Be prepared for questions about equity. While you may wish to defend your decisions, be circumspect about any information or reasoning you share.
  - The Virginia Tech HR structure includes two types of staff: Classified staff (typically hired before July 1, 2006) and University staff (typically hired on or after July 1, 2006). Be aware of differences and commonalities.

### **Rewarding Staff**

- Many staff are significantly underpaid in relation to their value to the department, especially those who are hardworking and very dedicated to their position. They appreciate very much the attention and consideration that you show by saying "thank you" for a job well done. This can take many forms, for example:
  - Actually saying "thank you" for good work and offering a compliment; doing this in front of the department at a meeting can demonstrate your genuine appreciation.

- Hand-writing a “thank you,” commending them for work well-done.
- Taking them to lunch at least once each semester to celebrate another good term of activity.
- Occasionally providing them a gift from the department (e.g., jackets, shirts, etc.).
- Making sure that staff members are nominated for college-level awards and, when appropriate, university-level awards.
- Providing an annual staff retreat experience (e.g., a full- or half-day event, with dinner provided afterwards for staff and their spouses)—done in the summer.

*Any gifts given to employees should be done with understanding of the university rules that limit the amount of such gifts and the proper reporting as required by these rules.*

### **Staff Advancement**

Remember, staff salaries are not in the same league as faculty and other professional salaries on campus. Consider all ways you can advance your staff.

- Consider special merit adjustments where appropriate—10% is usually the limit (will come from your budget unless your college has supplemental funding).
- Create and pursue opportunities for additional training, let them select a program to attend that will improve their skill set. Consider on- and off-campus opportunities. Offer congratulations when training is completed. Let the department know about this accomplishment.

### **Staff Empowerment**

Basic philosophy—“Treat staff members as professionals and expect them to conduct their work in a professional manner.”

- Allow staff members some leeway in establishing their actual work schedule. This needs to be negotiated with the supervisor and others affected by the staff member’s areas of responsibility. Please check the appropriate sections of the *Virginia Tech Classified and University Staff Handbook* to be in compliance with existing university policy.
- Place selected staff members in charge of budgeted amounts of funding each year to support their activities. Staff members feel empowered if they do not have to seek approval for every single expenditure needed to do their job.
- Leave nearly all decision-making up to the staff. Don’t micromanage them—you need to establish expectations and goals and then let them work, following up on it as appropriate.
- Empower the staff with the authority and responsibility to stop unsafe work practices in their areas. Let them know they do not have to engage in any practice that is outside bounds of policy, safety, ethical practice and that they have the power to say no and that you will back them. Let the faculty know of this empowerment.

### **It’s all about the People**

Do not miss any opportunity to make your staff feel valued. The ramifications of such lost opportunities will far outweigh the effort and time you spend in communicating your appreciation to the staff, individually and as a group, for their contributions, efforts, and accomplishments. Your genuine appreciation does not come with a direct cost—but failing to recognize, appreciate and include your staff as valuable team members in your department can definitely create liabilities. Remember them in your newsletters, annual reports, etc. *It’s all about the people.*