

# **Communication Strategies for Department Administrators**

## **Certificate in Advanced Leadership & Management (CALM) Program**

### **CALM Team 6°**

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Inspiring Innovation and Discovery

McMaster University is a community supporting students and research with a diverse group of staff located on campus and at a number of facilities across the city. This diversity contributes to the complex working environment that exists at McMaster University; creating a unified, engaged team of employees continues to be a challenge. Department Administrators play a pivotal role in aligning distinct groups within McMaster University. Providing these important individuals with the necessary support, tools, consistent and up-to-date information as well as networking opportunities is vital.

The initial scope of the Department Administrator Training Program project abstract was very broad. The description suggested developing “a comprehensive model for training for department administrators in McMaster University administrative processes and technology”. Our project team of the Certificate in Advanced Leadership & Management program (6° CALM team) in consultation with our project champions narrowed our focus to concentrate on the systems and procedures of Business Management Systems (BMS) as most administrators at McMaster University are exposed to tasks associated with financial and purchasing processes. We consulted with BMS to identify any current gaps in knowledge and to review existing training formats with the goal of identifying and developing a training model template. Our early research revealed that a wealth of training programs already exist in a variety of formats to suit the preferences of most trainees. However, it became clear that staff were having difficulty finding information about the training offered, as well as where to look for standard forms, procedural guidelines and difficulty finding correct answers to everyday questions in a timely manner.

As a result, we refined our scope to focus on identifying methods to improve communication among and to Department Administrators, to provide a forum for information sharing and to increase staff confidence by developing a model for increased visibility and ease of distribution of up-to-date information about BMS processes and procedures.

Our 6° CALM team investigated existing training opportunities for Department Administrators and concluded that many training modules have been established, but that staff awareness of training is generally lacking and that access to training has been poorly communicated. We found that consistency between departments, a simple method to access information in real time, as well as opportunities to share best practices were the primary concerns of administrators and staff. The 6° CALM team has identified communication strategies that can be implemented with minimal resources and time. The recommendations outlined in this document will enhance current processes already in place, provide a cohesive approach across departments to answer common questions as well as provide a unified icon on the McMaster University website that can easily be recognized by internal staff, students and members of the external community. In addition, we are suggesting opportunities for improved staff engagement through information sharing and networking.

Three recommendations are identified:

- (1) Implementation of IntelliResponse (an interactive question and answer platform) for Business Management Services (BMS).
- (2) Standardization of the ‘Ask McMaster’ icon to be adopted by all departments utilizing IntelliResponse with a landing page for ‘Ask McMaster’ that can be accessed from the McMaster University website Home page.
- (3) Initiation of a series of Administrative Lunch and Learn (ALL) sessions aimed at Department Administrators to provide up-to-date information and opportunities for information sharing and networking for new and existing employees.

Through our research and information gathering, conducted over the last eight months, Department Administrators as well as BMS communicated the need for improved information sharing and quick response to daily inquiries related to systems and processes. The implementation of IntelliResponse by BMS will provide greater service to staff with minimal cost and time commitment by BMS. IntelliResponse is favourable over a 'Help Desk' as it ensures one consistent, correct answer and can link the user to other relevant information that is available on the BMS page of the McMaster University website.

IntelliResponse is not new to McMaster University. In fact, it has already been adopted and is being utilized successfully by four departments. However, each department utilizes a different icon on their page of the McMaster University website. In response to our team's request, the Office of Public Relations has developed a standard 'Ask McMaster' icon and will be able to install this icon for each department as well as develop a 'landing page' (navigation tool) to access 'Ask McMaster' for each department directly from the McMaster University Home page. The Director, Public and Community Relations, has indicated that the implementation is simple and would take less than a month. A consistent icon would become recognizable by staff and students seeking information about McMaster University processes, procedures and resources. The landing page would enable the user to access a specific department prior to asking a question, therefore separating the needs of students and staff to ensure every user can easily obtain the information they require.

It was evident from various discussions, collated survey responses, and suggestions obtained during focus groups that staff have the desire to network and share information with colleagues working in similar positions. Best practices can be discussed and problems can be described along with suggestions for streamlining current processes. Administrative Lunch and Learn (ALL) sessions can be implemented with minimal cost and organization and serve four purposes, to: (1) share information, (2) build networks with colleagues, (3) enhance staff engagement, and (4) provide feedback to the hosting department. Our Pilot ALL session held on June 6, 2011 was very successful, with good attendance, great dialogue between staff and presenters and overall positive evaluation results. A number of suggestions for future sessions were communicated. In addition, our 6° CALM team has already been approached by another department interested in hosting an ALL session.

This project recognizes that the Vision 2020 technology strategy will revamp and greatly improve the technological landscape at McMaster University. However, we appreciate that Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) will take time to develop and implement. Our goal is to provide effective solutions that can be immediately adopted.

The three recommendations are relatively easy to implement in a short period of time with minimal resources. These changes will assist in enhancing access to information for Department Administrators, improve communications to empower a more productive team and foster networking at McMaster University.

The 6° CALM team has developed a comprehensive business case document that outlines our research and information gathering, survey results, focus group findings along with our recommendation details with anticipated benefits, associated costs and implementation timelines.