Planning Corner:
Don’t Forget the Point Person

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We encounter so many things that didn’t even exist only a short time ago. Do you remember the first time you heard the term world wide web? Who knew we would heat our lunches by agitating the molecules in our food (ala the microwave)? The career I have now as a planning and improvement consultant didn’t even exist when I was filling out those interest inventories in high school. (I was advised to marry a clergyman.)

Another one of those new arrivals to the work scene is the idea and embodiment of a point person. We should find a point person wherever there is a goal or some kind of collective action taking place.

A point person is not quite the same thing as the team leader, although one could serve both functions, depending on the situation. A team leader often has some functional authority over those working on a particular effort or has authority “bestowed” for the task. But what about efforts that involve players from multiple units from different parts of the organization, who may ordinarily interact very little, and perhaps hold varying levels of authority and responsibility? These horizontal efforts can benefit by having a point person. The point person is responsible for ensuring that the goal is progressing as planned. Without functional authority over many or any of the players, the point person’s tools are progress checks and documentation and dissemination of what has been accomplished. The point person also is the only one with the “view of the whole” and connection to all the parts and thus plays an essential linking role, connecting people with others when their efforts are related. This perspective of both the parts and the whole makes the point person uniquely situated to coordinating reporting of progress and results.

In decentralized organizations such as the university, it is often difficult to know who to go to. The point person is the individual people can go to with ideas for improving or with concerns or to identify an opportunity that the group might seize. If a group’s progress is blocked, the point person takes the initiative to work with the group to resolve the problem and move forward.

A point person is identified for each of the UW-Madison vision priorities. For example, Associate Vice-Chancellor Robert Skloot is the point person for the priority “Reconceptualizing Undergraduate Education.” In his role as point person, he coordinates, focuses, helps identify gaps and overlap among efforts, collects information on on-going efforts, and links the efforts of many, many people and units on campus as they work toward enhancing undergraduate education.

Without point people, goals in even the best strategic plans can languish. With a point person, someone is clearly responsible for nurturing the goal along.

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