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## Theory Z Management and the College Writing Center

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Directors of college writing centers must play many roles: teacher, tutor, secretary, statistician, technical writer, counselor, and these days even computer programmer. Our advanced degrees in English did not train us for all these roles, and many of us enroll in courses and seminars in everything from grant writing to computer literacy in an attempt to make up for what we have missed. But there is one important role that writing center directors must play for which they have received little training, and for which they are unlikely to receive any formal training once on the job. That role is the role of manager.

Most writing center directors supervise a staff of anywhere from two to twenty, a staff which might include full-time and part-time instructors, graduate teaching assistants, peer tutors, or an uncomfortable mix of all of the above. Having shunned courses in business and management as undergraduates and having had little management experience before assuming their titles, many writing center directors encounter difficulty solving staff management problems when they arise. So they stumble along from crisis to crisis—personality conflicts among staff members, complaints about everything from salaries to work schedules, student complaints about conflicting directions from instructors—never really establishing any coherent management policy or logical lines of authority. The result is inefficient management for the writing center, confusion for the students for which the center operates, and a high level of frustration for the director. Should we wonder why the turnover rate for such positions is high?

Writing center directors who have experienced such difficulties and frustrations would be wise to investigate a management style that is

receiving increasingly more attention by American businesses and business schools: Theory Z management. Named by William Ouchi of U.C.L.A.'s Graduate School of Management, Theory Z is a Japanese management style that has been imported by such American firms as IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Rockwell International, and Westinghouse. (Ouchi's theory is fully explained in *Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge* [Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1981]. Parenthetical page numbers refer to this work.)

Put simply, the Theory Z approach to management suggests "that involved workers are the key to increased productivity" (p. 4). Its basic lessons are two: trust between management and workers, and awareness of subtlety by management. Theory Z managers repudiate the mistrust between employer and employee that is characteristic of many American businesses. Theory Z managers foster an attitude of mutual trust: managers trust workers to make important decisions and to get involved in company policy making because managers realize that workers, like members of an efficient basketball squad, want to make decisions that will benefit the company; and workers trust management to reward them for their cooperation and effort. Theory Z managers also realize that relationships between people are complex and changing; the subtleties of human relationships cannot be respected by managers who rigidly enforce bureaucratic rules.

College and university operations are quite compatible with Theory Z management practices because of our educational institutions' emphasis on long-term goals instead of short-term financial profits. The goals of most colleges and universities, like those of Theory Z companies, are long-term: the school wants its students to learn skills and acquire knowledge that will be used many years after graduation. College administrators, unlike the managers of companies obsessed with immediate profits, are generally willing to operate in the red for short periods to ensure that those goals are not compromised. Theory Z businesses operate similarly, according to Ouchi: "...profits are regarded not as an end in themselves nor as the method of 'keeping score' in the competitive process. Rather, profits are the reward to the firm if it continues to provide true value to its customers, to help its employees to grow, and to behave responsibly as a corporate citizen" (p. 75).

Many of the features of Theory Z management can be integrated into the administration of a college writing center. These features include

lifetime employment, slow evaluation and promotion, nonspecialized career paths, implicit control mechanisms, collective decision making, collective responsibility, and wholistic concern for employees. While all are not equally applicable to managing a college writing center, nor equally feasible, most offer lessons that will make a writing center run efficiently and productively.

*Stable Employment:*

Perhaps the most well-known characteristic of the Theory Z company is a lifetime employment policy. Employees are told that they will have jobs for life, regardless of national economic conditions, changes in the marketplace, and new competition. The company benefits from such a policy in many ways. The workforce is stable, thereby increasing worker loyalty to the company. Promotions are made from within, saving the company recruiting expenses. Most important, lifetime employees are more likely to shun short-term profits and insist on adherence to long-term goals.

The tenure system under which most colleges and universities operate is, of course, a lifetime employment system. The problem is that writing center tutors and instructors are rarely full-time, tenured instructors; most are part-timers or graduate students. Any writing center director, however, can see the advantage of having a staff that will remain stable for several years. First, a stable staff means less time spent training new personnel. Second, a stable staff means experienced instructors, and there is no substitute for experience when it comes to teaching writing. Third, after working with the same people for several semesters, a director will sense each staff member's strengths, weaknesses, personality, and teaching techniques; the director can then use this information when the time comes to assign duties and, more importantly, assign students to instructors.

How can a writing center director ensure staff stability? Inevitably, writing centers will continue to be staffed, to a great degree, by part-timers and graduate teaching assistants. But the writing center director should actively recruit full-timers and permanent part-timers to fill some writing center positions. Full-timers can be given a one-course load reduction for about ten hours of writing center work. And part-timers, whose employment situation is anything but stable, might welcome the opportunity for steady employment. The writing center that I direct uses two other instructors, a full-time, tenured instructor

and a part-timer who has taught at the school for four years and who will probably continue to do so for several more years. This stable staff brings our center the efficiency and productivity that is the mark of the Theory Z company.

*Non-specialization:*

An important feature of the Theory Z company is non-specialized careers. Managers and workers are not trained for a *single* job. They move from job to job within the company, especially in their early years. This movement enables employees to learn about various aspects of the company rather than only one. It also minimizes crises during long illnesses; the job of the absent employee can be handled by others. Most important, employee movement from work station to work station fosters cooperation between employees, which is a goal of Theory Z management.

Non-specialization should also be a feature of the staff of a college writing center. Too often, instructors become specialists, often merely because of habit. One instructor works one-to-one with remedial writers because he has always done it. Another instructor teaches sentence skills in small groups because that is her specialty. The result can be a lack of flexibility among writing center instructors, boredom from endless repetition of the same tasks, and resentment by instructors who feel that they are constantly being given the most taxing jobs.

I try to assign our center's instructors a variety of tasks. First, most instruction is non-specialized; all students work with instructors on all aspects of the writing process, from organization to spelling. Second, I try to allow each instructor to play some role in all of our programs—tutoring remedial students, teaching small-group workshops, servicing walk-ins. It is also desirable to give all instructors some responsibility for doing administrative paperwork, planning programs, and designing assignments—jobs too often performed solely by the director. The result is flexible staff members who are always learning and rarely bored. Most important, non-specialization makes all activities “team efforts,” which means increased productivity.

*Implicit Control Mechanisms:*

Ouchi argues that too many businesses have control mechanisms that “become explicit and formal, losing all of the subtlety and complexity that can exist in cooperative life” (p. 61). Theory Z companies, however, exhibit *implicit* control mechanisms, which are derived from a

sharing of common goals and values. When co-workers share common values and understand company goals, they respond similarly and consistently when problems arise: “This theory, implicit rather than explicit, cannot be set down completely in so many sentences. Rather, the theory is communicated through a common culture shared by key managers and, to some extent, all employees” (p. 41).

During any typical school day, dozens of problems and decisions will confront writing center directors and instructors. It is impossible to have a policy that covers each one. The only control mechanism, therefore, is an understanding, by the whole writing center staff, of the center’s goals and values. Decisions can be made with those values and goals in mind.

For example, a student complains to me that an instructor wants him to revise a paper which a student believes is in acceptable form. Since one of my objectives as director is to maintain a pleasant and challenging work atmosphere for our center’s instructors and to treat the instructors with the respect that they as professionals deserve, I will uphold that instructor’s decision, even if my immediate response suggested that the student’s paper was acceptable. Certainly the student will not be harmed or taxed by a one-hour revision, and the instructor will realize that I respect her judgment. The result is the mutual trust for which Theory Z managers strive.

#### *Collective Decision Making:*

Probably the most important feature of Theory Z companies is participatory decision making. In Japanese automobile companies, for example, major decisions—the marketing of new models, the opening of new plants, quality control policies—are made by both management and workers. Managers recognize that even assembly workers can provide useful input in corporate decisions because workers at the workstation level observe every step in the company’s production process.

All major decisions and policies in college writing centers should be collective, involving the director and the entire staff. Decisions on methods of instruction, instructional materials, course and workshop design, administrative policies, and scheduling should be made by group consensus, not by an autocratic director. If such decisions are made collectively, staff members are more likely to enforce policies consistently because all staff members agreed on those policies. Policies handed down by an autocratic director are less likely to be consistently enforced; they might be perceived as merely the caprices of the director.

I have come to see my role as a writing center director as that of a synthesizer rather than a policy maker. At staff meetings when major decisions are made, I will present two or three options to solve a problem (or perhaps just clearly articulate the problem) and leave it to my staff to come up with a solution. I will try to say little until everyone has spoken; after each staff member has spoken, I will try to synthesize common elements of each member's response and frame one or two specific solutions from these common elements. Then we will reach the solution with which everyone is comfortable. I definitely agree with Ouchi's statement that "the skillful leader does more listening than talking. What matters most is the skill of observing the pattern of interaction in the group and knowing when to intervene" (p. 107).

Once collective decision making is initiated, staff members will be eager to participate in all policy decisions; indeed, staff members will feel left out when not consulted (and if the director is doing a good job, staff members will voice their protests if they are not consulted). Last year, I made the mistake of formulating and announcing to the faculty members in my department a new policy without consulting my staff. When my staff members read the memo which announced the policy, they voiced their reservations about the new policy. I could not retract my policy, but I promised that the policy would be implemented on a one-semester trial, and afterward we would discuss the issue and resolve it as a group.

#### *Collective Responsibility:*

Collective responsibility comes with collective decision making. In Theory Z companies, the team, not the individual, is rewarded for success because all achievements are team efforts.

Ensuring collective responsibility in a college writing center commences with simple gestures, such as the director changing "I" to "we" or "the staff" in memos and reports or the director informing other members of the academic community that questions can be answered and problems solved by anyone on the staff. Collective responsibility also means that rewards, compliments, and achievements are shared among all staff members—and, more importantly, that no single staff member is blamed for a bad decision or judgment.

The result of introducing collective responsibility is that students, faculty members, and administrators will sense that the writing center operates as a team. Students will know that they will be fairly and con-

sistently treated. Faculty members and administrators will get a sense that they can walk in the writing center door and get their problems solved quickly and efficiently.

*Wholistic Concern for People:*

Most American businesses, according to Ouchi, practice a partial concern for their workers; employers care only about employees' performance at work and care little about their after-work lives. But Theory Z companies develop a wholistic concern for employees; employers express concern for the employee's family life, social life, health, and retirement.

The writing center director must express a similar concern. The director must realize that staff members are complex human beings with interests outside of work. That means that the director must provide flexible work schedules, especially for staff members with families or part-time staff members who hold other jobs. It means that the director must be the staff members' spokesperson when it comes to speaking up to higher college administrators for better salaries and benefits (particularly if staff members are part-time instructors or graduate teaching assistants). It also means that the writing center director must always speak with the center's staff in mind when voicing opinions in department and all-college meetings.

One mechanism for exhibiting this wholistic concern used by Theory Z companies is the promotion of social activities such as company outings, dinners, parties, and sports contests. At such events, managers and workers get to mingle and become exposed to each other's after-work interests. The writing center director can take a cue from such companies. End-of-semester lunches or parties, excursions to professional conferences or to the theater, and even school cafeteria lunches can bring about that mixing. The writing center director's concern should extend beyond the writing center.

What will be the result of employing these Theory Z tactics in a college writing center? Ouchi claims that in businesses these "humanized working conditions not only increased productivity and profits to the company but also the self-esteem for employees" (p. 196). The same will occur at the college writing center.

Writing center staff members will become more involved and, hence, more productive. The director who gets the whole staff involved in decision making will have a staff ready to perform its duties well and

accept new responsibilities. One of our writing center instructors is a part-time faculty member who, for the most part, taught her classes, held office hours, and went home. (And who can blame part-time instructors for working this way!) Since becoming involved in the writing center, she has also become more involved in department and college-wide activities. She regularly attends department meetings, has accepted committee appointments, and has attended various all-college workshops. She is a more productive member of the college community.

I believe that our center's instructors also have a great sense of self-esteem. Our center's record has been excellent; we have taken some very weak student writers and in a semester or two have turned them into competent student writers. Our dean, department chair, and faculty members throughout the college have noted our accomplishments. Because our instructors are involved in every aspect of our center's operation, they feel proud of the center's accomplishments. This sense of self-esteem makes their work more pleasant, and it pushes them to help maintain our center's good record—which again increases productivity.

How does the Theory Z director benefit? Besides enjoying the sense of accomplishment that comes with high productivity and the good feeling that comes from managing happy workers, the director has a less hectic work day. Ouchi points out that when Theory Z management takes hold,

each manager should begin to feel less harried. . . . Less harried because there should be fewer occasions where subordinates need help resolving disputes, fewer new products that get into trouble through lack of information, fewer demands to create a specific policy or rule to decide an issue. In short, the managers end up by having more time to plan, to wander around, to reflect. Their jobs are not being passed down the line to subordinates who are busier and busier; rather, the time formerly consumed by fixing some lack of coordination and in settling disputes is now only partially filled by committees and meetings. The remainder of the time is available for going beyond remedial management to the building of more effective organization. (pp. 112-13)

Is there any writing center director who would not want his or her work day to run as smoothly?