Tips to Guide the Transfer of Institutional Knowledge

With waves of retirements, resignations or role reassessments happening in many workplaces, the transfer of institutional knowledge has become a top priority for managers, leaders and HR experts across all industries. Here are some proven methods to capture key knowledge before critical staff and leaders depart:

- **ID critical roles and departure risks:** You may already know the business critical roles in your department and individuals in those roles that represent the greatest departure risks. If not, work with others to identify those roles, and the subject matter experts (SMEs) who 1) are at the greatest risk of leaving without notice in the near future, and 2) who hold the most critical institutional knowledge not yet transferred to others in the department. Focus your efforts here.

- **Interview SMEs:** Once you've identified critical SMEs (see above), conduct 1:1 interviews to better understand their work and the factors, key relationships, effective behaviors, etc. that allow them to be successful in their roles.

- **Document standard work, or Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for key processes:** There are may different ways of doing this. In general, documentation should describe the key steps in a process, inputs to the process and expected outcomes. It's also imperative to include which elements are standardized and can't be overlooked, as well as clear expectations for why certain steps are important to achieve consistent quality outcomes.

- **Conduct process walks:** In a process walk, a SME walks a team of documenters through the process steps they perform. This should be done at the actual location or worksite where the SMEdoes their work. Team members document key elements of each step, the specific challenges or issues that arise, how issues are addressed, the successful actions or behaviors performed by staff, etc.

- **Leverage acting assignments:** When leadership or critical SME roles become temporarily vacant, departments may find themselves with an excellent opportunity to offer current employees a short term assignment (STA) to gain knowledge and experience of the work involved. It's important to identify a start/stop timeline for this STA and to identify what elements of a person's existing role can temporarily be halted. This allows the STA to be an actual time of learning, not an extension of a person's functional to-do list.

- **Shadow:** In an effort to support internal mobility, when an excellent existing employee is the likely candidate to be promoted into the role of a person leaving TCU, prioritize making time for that person to shadow the SME to learn how the work is currently performed. This also allows the rising leader to evaluate where gaps might exist or where initial changes may need to occur to modernize a role.

- **Mentor:** This type of info transfer can take place in real-time all of the time by creating avenues for experienced SMEs to guide others with "learning the ropes." Mentoring is particularly useful for learning the non-transactional aspects of the work such as effective interpersonal behaviors, coalition building, critical thinking, complex decision making, etc.

- **Support communities of practice:** Create flexibility for people working in similar roles and disciplines to interact regularly (in person or virtual), share knowledge and learn from one another. It's ideal if highly experienced SMEs are part of these communities.

- **Establish over lapping appointments:** Create an overlap between when the candidate taking on the role has time to interact with the current SME before that person leaves. This provides time and opportunity for the effective transfer of knowledge.

- And of course: **Conduct succession planning**, which would encompass many of the options above.

Questions for leaders, to support transfer of institutional knowledge

1. What areas of knowledge in your operations are most critical to transfer? Why?

2. Who are the subject matter experts (SMEs) that currently hold this knowledge?

3. To what degree are these SMEs backed up – i.e., there are other staff who can step in and take on their responsibilities?

4. What is the risk to the business in areas where we don't have sufficient back up for these SMEs?

5. What are your current plans to mitigate this risk and ensure there is knowledge transfer?

Questions for subject matter experts (who represent the greatest departure risks)

1. What are your key responsibilities?

2. Of these, which do you consider to be your 5 most important? Why?

3. Who else is able to perform the tasks associated with these 5 key responsibilities?

4. To what degree are these tasks documented? Where?

5. To what degree could someone not familiar with the work pick up the documentation and perform these tasks? What's missing?

6. What would make it challenging for someone else to take on the required tasks?

7. Which of these tasks is most time consuming? Most challenging?

8. What are the 10 knowledge or skill areas most important to be successful in your work?

9. Please list your most important contacts for your work (phone #, email, etc.). Why are these contacts so important?

10. What behaviors, actions, approaches seem to be most effective in working with these key contacts? Why?

11. Who do you rely on consistently for assistance to perform your work?

12. What additional resources, equipment, etc., do you require to be successful?

13. What is the most common issue, request, or question people bring to you? Who in particular brings them?

14. What do you think are the 5 most important issues that need to be addressed to improve the outcomes of your work? What specific improvements do you recommend?

15. What else would you like to share to support an effective transfer of knowledge?