

Leadership Interview

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Jaclyn “Jackie” Lange is the Assistant Director of Client Services at Northern Arizona University’s Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid. I had the opportunity to interview Jackie about her current leadership role in higher education on September 3, 2015. This interview entailed detailed questions about her current role, her background, and her leadership style.

In my first question, I asked Jackie where her current position fits within the organizational structure within the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid at NAU. She explained that in the office, there are two main areas. These areas are broken down into Client Services and Operations. The Director oversees both of these areas. There are three Associate Directors who report to the Director. There are two in Client Services and one in Operations. Under the Associate Directors for Client Services and Operations, there is an Assistant Director for each area. Jackie is the Assistant Director for the Client Services department. There is no Assistant Director for the Scholarships department, which is part of the Client Services team. Jackie stated that there has never really been a demand to have an Assistant Director for this area since it’s a small team.

Under normal circumstances, she would be directly reporting to the Associate Director of Client Services, but due to a recent change, the Associate Director was let go and now she reports to the Director. In her position, she oversees six senior Program Coordinators. Each senior Program Coordinator supervises a minimum of one Program Coordinator and/or a combination of Student Workers.

I asked Jackie how she was selected for the position she currently holds. She recounted applying through Human Resources, being selected for a phone interview, a committee interview, and a department Q&A. The Q&A entails every individual in the office asking her questions to gauge her knowledge base of financial aid. In the final step of the interviews and selection process, she met with the Director. This lasted about two weeks before she was selected for the position she currently holds.

Jackie believes it was a natural progression for her when I asked her what led her to pursue this position. She indicated she has had other lateral and promotional roles within the office over the last four years when she started in the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid at NAU. She believes this was the next step and challenge for her. She explained that she was motivated to use her MBA from University of Phoenix to move into a leadership role where she could create opportunities for the Client Services team and implement strategies for further development of the department. She indicated that it's best to start from the bottom and move your way up because you learn a lot going through each channel of the organizational structure.

When I asked her what her areas of responsibility were, and where she spent the greatest amount of time, she responded by saying that she spends most of her time in four separate capacities. First, she oversees eight programs within the Client Services department assuring that deadlines are being met for the following programs: Veteran Affairs/Educational Benefits, Tribal Funding, Grants, Personalized Learning, Consortium Agreements, Graduate Programs, Outreach, and Federal Work Study/Faculty & Staff Tuition Assistance. Secondly, she assists with

troubleshooting issues and updating all communications (forms, websites, policies and procedures). In her third capacity, she indicated that in the busy months for financial aid disbursements, she assists in meeting with students and helps out with processing when program coordinators are behind due to increased workloads or are out of the office. Lastly, Jackie indicated that she works hard to make sure her team is working collaboratively and are on task to ensure the best possible performances each day.

To understand her leadership background, I asked her which aspects of her education and prior experiences have best prepared her to lead effectively in her current role. She described how her MBA led her to develop an understanding of how the business side of higher education works, how to effectively service customers, and how being a goal driven individual can help with conducting job responsibilities and outcomes to a higher standard. She indicated that before working in higher education, she didn't truly have an accurate understanding of how things worked. However, she had the opportunity to work for University of Phoenix before coming to Northern Arizona University and by being in different roles, it provided her with a deeper dimensional understanding that has contributed to improved leadership skills. She also attended multiple training initiatives offered by Human Resources, which focus on professional development and how to be an effective supervisor for different kinds of employees.

I asked Jackie what her preferred strategy is for continuing to develop as a leader. She indicated that she enjoys learning and is always looking for more ways to develop herself and her staff. She continues to attend different Human Resource trainings throughout the year and sets

goals for her staff to attend at least five trainings a year. She believes that everyone, even employees who have been at the university for 20 years can learn something new and use these experiences to better serve their students and better themselves. In addition, she reaches out for guidance when needed from the Director and reads up on current higher education industry events. Once a year she has the opportunity to attend the FSA Conference, which is a U.S. financial aid conference that educates financial aid professionals on new rules and regulations. She stated that these are very important because they ensure her office remains compliant with new federal regulations and that they are in line with other higher education institutions in regards to their approaches with processing financial aid.

Jackie expressed that her current leadership management style is hands-off when I asked her to describe her past and current influences that have had an impact on her leadership style. She said that she was influenced by another supervisor (although not her direct supervisor) at University of Phoenix who explained her tactics on productivity, guidance, and empowering her team. In the supervisor's experience, micro-managing was not popular. Jackie had also experienced a micro-managing approach with a former supervisor and it didn't lead to her being more productive or sticking around for very long. She said that she learned from this experience that being open to feedback contributes to the perception among staff that she is an available, valuable resource when help is needed.

When I asked Jackie to describe her approach to leadership. She indicated that she's not sure if there is a particular name to the approach she uses. However, she gets to know her staff

and then has them get to know her so that they can trust her in her role. This allows her to be more hands-off because they trust her knowledge and approach. Staff are more willing to come forward when mistakes are made because they see that she's even tempered and doesn't overreact. She understands that everyone makes mistakes and does her best to teach her staff to learn from their mistakes and to keep pressing forward. She stated that she has a very positive professional relationship with all of her staff because she trusts them and they trust her.

To determine what her strengths are I asked her what she believes her strengths are as a leader and if there are aspects of her leadership in which she'd like to grow or develop. She stated that her strengths are being straightforward with people, being able to address situations directly to "nip it in the bud" and not wait for tomorrow if it can be dealt with now. She also prides herself on her ability to prioritize, which she said comes with time. She hopes to continue to develop herself by being able to know how to do each task or responsibility that her staff does on a daily basis. This will allow her to be able to be more of a "jack of all trades" and assist in a more helpful ways when her staff is out of the office.

When I asked her what her biggest challenge are as a leader, she explained that it's difficult at times handle a mix of different personality types because she can't treat everyone the same. She must establish working relationships with her staff based on each individual's personality. In addition, she indicated it's challenging to motivate individuals because everyone is different. Not everyone will react the same to different opportunities. She said that this is the one thing she really wants to work on because it's important to keep people motivated and

empowered. She emphasized how individual empowerment results in happier, better performing employees.

When I asked her what her greatest professional accomplishment as a leader in an institution of higher education was to date, Jackie stated that her greatest accolade was receiving the Louie Award from Northern Arizona University. She said that she was nominated by an individual from another department and said the award was for outstanding contribution the NAU through the Transfer Commuter Connections program. In that program, through her role as the Outreach and Training Program Coordinator for the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid at NAU, she helped many students, through her presentations, to better understand financial aid.

To conclude the interview, I asked her what is unique or distinctive about being a leader in an institution of higher education. Jackie indicated that because she works strictly with financial aid, she thinks it's unique that although the university may have their own rules that her office must follow all state and federal rules and regulations because the office is dealing mostly with federal funding. She said it's a great environment because they get to educate students and parents about policies beyond the institutional realm and they also serve as a means for students to afford a higher education. She enjoys working in an industry that allows her to think critically to solve problems, use her knowledge and experiences to create better business processes, and allows her to be in a rewarding leadership role.

During the interview, I thought about all of the leadership styles Jackie had exhibited and why I was convinced of her effective leadership ability. One element I didn't mention is that

Jackie is also my supervisor. I'm currently one of the senior Program Coordinators that she oversees. This truly helps me critique her as a leader, because I know her on a more professional and personal level, rather than just having met her for the first time for this interview. I believe this is an advantage that will help dive into the leadership styles, traits, and characteristics she exhibits because I have had hand-on experience with her being a leader to me.

Jackie demonstrates a lot of leadership aptitudes talked about in *Leadership: Theory and Practice (7th ed.)* by Peter Northouse. To relate some of these to Jackie's current leadership abilities outlined in the interview, I will walk through a couple major testimonials I caught that she said that relate to Northouse's book.

When Jackie mentioned that she interprets what she learned in her MBA program by being goal driven, having high standards and keeping positive working relationships with her staff and others in the office, this revealed her connection to the Behavioral Approach mentioned in Chapter 4. Specifically, in regards to Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid. Based on her behavior, she exhibits the Team Management (9,9) leadership style, which "places a strong emphasis on both tasks and interpretational relationships" (Northouse, 2015, pg. 74), while also promoting teamwork and commitment of her employees to do well in their current roles. In this chapter, it's also mentioned that "some followers need leaders who provide a lot of direction, whereas others need leaders who can show them a great deal of nurturance and support" (Northouse, 2015, pg. 79), which fits within her leadership abilities because she makes sure she

is approachable to her employees. If there were ever an instance where an employee needed direction or support, Jackie would be there to provide this to her staff.

Jackie also mentioned that she builds trust with her employees by getting to know them and by them getting to know her. This creates trust and relates to the Leadership-Member Exchange Theory discussed in Chapter 7. This focuses on the relationship that exists between a leader and their followers and emphasizes that leaders need to develop good relationships with their employees “to make every follower feel as if he or she is part of the in-group, and by doing so, avoids inequalities and negative implications” (Northouse, 2015, pg. 142). This was also demonstrated when she mentioned that she treats everyone as equals, no matter their position. It is well-known that a good leader will demonstrate Leadership-Member Exchanges and it will result in the followers “feeling better, accomplishing more, and helping the organizations prosper” in addition to creating less employee turn-over and increased organizational commitment overall.

Another major component of leadership that she exhibits is related to the Path-Goal Theory discussed in Chapter 6. This is exhibited by her directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership behaviors. She demonstrates these behaviors by “setting clear standards of performance and makes the rules and regulations clear to follow” (Northouse, 2015, pg. 117). Jackie ensures that her staff knows what they need to do and is conscious of deadlines. If someone needs help due to their workload, she jumps right in to help and doesn’t put her employees down for not getting to things when they’re overloaded. She trusts that her staff are doing everything they can to be productive and includes them on decision making. As stated in

the interview, has her staff attend a minimum of five Human Resource trainings each year. This is a direct example of her setting goals for her employees that also is focused on bettering the employees' abilities.

If I could recommend one thing to Jackie, it would be to adapt the Transformational Leadership approach discussed in Chapter 8. This focuses on what raises employee motivation, which is directly related to her goal of keeping her staffs drive up. It can be used to help staff reach their full potential by being an attentive leader to meet the needs to the staff, which will in turn empower and motivate the staff. In this approach, Jackie can utilize the Kouzes and Posner Model which consists of five fundamental practices. This includes: "model the way, inspire a share vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart" (Northouse, 2015, pg. 174). Jackie can do this by leading by example, sharing her goals with her staff, changing current processes to be more effective, encouraging others to participate in team building exercises and issues that involve a team-wide effort, and emphasizing that she is right there with them - being supportive. I believe that this will give the kick-start her staff (including me) need to increase the drive.

I believe Jackie is a great leader and will only continue to move up the higher education later because she is an empowering, goal-drive, supportive, and structured leader. It's truly a pleasure to work for her and have her as a mentor to look up to.

When I become a leader in higher education, I hope to be a leader who exhibits many of the same leadership styles, qualities, skills, and traits that Jackie represents. Although I didn't get

a chance to ask Jackie about her standing on how she deals with change, I think it's a very important question. There is a lot to be said about being a leader in a higher education environment that is ever-changing. This is because “social and historical change happen without our conscious awareness of their impact, or without an appreciation for their long-term consequences, or even knowledge that it is change” (Lincoln, 2000). A lot of people believe that being a leader in higher education can be a tough role to take on, because of these changes. However, I believe with the right mind-set, a leader can find great success in this kind of environment. The best way to do this is by modeling “those behaviors we want to see in society” (Tierney, 2003), which means that all individuals in leadership roles needs to act as a role-model for others. Good role models, like Jackie, will result in better leadership following her.

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