Notes from Communi-tea on Managing and Mentoring

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Notes by Hannah

Approximately 50 people participated, both in-person and by Zoom.
Attendees reported having broad-ranging conversations (yay!)

Managing

- Many folks are managing but aren't actually listed as supervisors - e.g. students managing interns, and similar situations where people end up managing who aren't necessarily supposed to be in charge in that sense.
- Communication is key! People (managers) need to be available to communicate
    - People have different communication styles
    - A lot of difficulties in management stem from poor communication
    - Interpersonal relationships need to be tended to - this includes recognizing that people communicate in different ways
    - "Codes of Conduct" or "Social Guidelines" can be part of this
- Delegating is complicated
    - How do we figure out how much time a task will take? There's how much time a manager thinks things will take, but there also needs to be an opportunity for the person doing the task to provide feedback.
- There are grassroots interdepartmental efforts happening - mentoring programs, training, matching staff to projects - to make up for a lack of personnel management across WHOI
    - A lot of this comes back to WHOI's intrinsic funding model - you need to have a place to charge your time
        - People seek training but aren't funded for it on a large scale
        - If you're a staff member who works on multiple projects, who do you go to when you're seeking funding to attend a meeting/training?
        - If you just want to come to a communi-tea like this, how do you justify it? Do you say it's your lunch break? Do you make up the hour of time later?
            - Perspectives vary: for some of us, when managing/mentoring is a priority and we see it as part of our job, participating in something like this communi-tea naturally is also part of the job
        - Lack of support *and* lack of incentives
    - Should share lists of proposals internally so people know what's going on and can more efficiently use the person-power we have on staff here

- Safety and management are connected
    - How to prioritize safety vs productivity? Managers are much more incentivized for the latter.
- At WHOI managers are often just the people who have been here the longest. There is very little (if any) supervisory training. Formal training is a good idea and we should have more of it.
    - Promotion to managerial roles is not based on managerial skill, it's based on scientific/technical skill. This is common across academic institutions but just because everyone does it doesn't mean it's a good idea
    - If you're stepping into a supervisory role, there should be supervisor training *and* some evaluation of your supervising through annual reviews
    - Conundrum of training: do you just wait until someone does something wrong, or do you actively reach out to people before that?
    - Training should include even simple things, like how to fill out timecards, so people can then teach this to their direct reports.
    - Mandatory training probably necessary because the people who need it are often the least likely to show up if it's voluntary
        - Then again, people who don't want to be there can still sit in a room for an hour and ignore everything that's said and not change their behavior. This is why the evaluation component is key.
- Is there a managers' affinity group type thing? Peer group to ask questions?
    - If you're a manager and things aren't going well, maybe you could ask some manager peers. Get supervisors together to problem solve.
- Part of a manager's priorities should be to promote/develop their employees
    - Just managing a project vs *leading* a project
    - This connects to theme 2: mentoring!
- Those of us who are managers, generally manage the way that other people managed us throughout our careers
    - This can perpetuate a vicious cycle unless we are careful (train people who are becoming managers) or unless we are lucky (happen to always promote people who are committed to being good managers and *learning* to be better managers)
    - Many many companies do the simple thing of bringing in external management training. We've been talking about this at WHOI forever and haven't done it but maybe now is the time. Hiring Shawna (Director of Learning & Development) is a step in the right direction.

Mentoring

- PIs are extremely busy and have a lot of mentoring obligations, often informal obligations but obligations nonetheless
    - PIs need support and time to do these things. If you meet with a mentee for an hour, you've lost that hour for research and grant-writing, but mentoring is also arguably a responsibility.

- How can we incentivize mentoring in a positive way?
    - Providing funding and time.
    - Considering mentoring in evaluations so we can reward it when it's done well.
    - There are some programs (WHOI's your buddy, tech staff mentor matching, peer mentoring programs) that are good on paper but haven't gotten enough uptake to be super effective. Need people to be incentivized to sign up to mentor as well as to be mentees
        - Some of this goes to supervisors: encourage your supervisees to get mentoring, or to be mentors. And again, this circles back to time and money. Is mentoring part of the job? Is the time you spend on it compensated? If your supervisor is a hard-line exact-hours person, maybe you can't volunteer to be a mentor.
- Supervisor vs mentor vs advisor: what's the difference?
    - Supervisor is transactional, making sure things are good and getting done
        - There is interaction between mentoring and supervising
            - Supervisors are expected to be mentors, often. They don't always have the incentives (or the skills) to be good mentors.
            - On the academic track here, mentoring committees often roll over into promotion committees - mentors become evaluators. Is that a good dynamic?
    - Mentoring is broader, has to do with growth
        - Mentoring needs to be wanted; you can't force someone to accept mentoring or build a mentoring relationship
    - Advisor is project-based (though terminology use varies between people/roles)
- Is there administrative mentoring? Is there a program for that?
    - WHOI is working on a project management ladder. Will that include mentoring of some sort? Part of project management is interpersonal relationships, but will WHOI PMs just be responsible for paperwork? Or will they also be responsible for people management on projects, which includes mentoring?
- From a blue collar perspective, the culture is 100% about mentoring. To become a skilled tradesperson - master electrician, master carpenter, etc - you need mentors, and when you start in the trades you get one whether you like it or not (apprentice model). There are some similar things in how formal mentoring is handled in academia, but there are plenty of things to be learned from the trades model/culture.
- A difficulty facing supervisors/mentors: remote work. Changes how mentoring and supervising work, changes interpersonal relationships
- There is formalized mentoring (whether you want it or not) through the academic ladder (ie mentoring committees, assigned formal mentors) and then there is informal mentoring where people find mentors who can help them in ways that they need and that are unfulfilled through formal channels
    - There's a big difference between formal and informal mentoring
    - There are also potentially a lot of people at WHOI who don't get the formal mentoring (i.e. people who aren't tech or sci staff)

- It would be to everyone's benefit if we had more support for mentoring, in terms of funding (and even setting up) programs
- Formal mentoring programs need guidelines. Do such things exist?
    - There must be some best practices research out there
    - Some of us who have set up formal mentoring programs have not found much to pull from when we want to give people guidance on mentoring
        - NSF requires things like mentoring plans, but at least right now a lot of that is formulaic and there aren't training programs on effective mentoring (that we know of) to help make those plans more substantial and effective.
        - If you go looking you can find some PDFs with "mentoring tips" but that's about it as far as we know. And how do you train someone to be a mentor, anyway? Some of that depends on context, i.e. training could involve making sure mentors know about resources to point mentees to, but a lot of mentoring is building interpersonal relationships which is trickier to teach. Communication skills, teaching that people communicate in various ways - similar to points above about management.
    - Perhaps part of the problem is that mentoring is hard to define and also varies a lot depending on context - many kinds and for many purposes.
        - Mentors for career progress vs mentors for WHOI-specific bureaucratic intricacies vs mentors for figuring out how to live on the Cape