Using the Start | Stop | Continue Framework to Improve Library Operations

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Abstract

The Start | Stop | Continue Framework is a powerful tool for structuring conversations to elicit honest input from library personnel at all levels. Adapting this framework for team discussions rather than individual feedback enables libraries to create opportunities for meaningful engagement and meaningful improvement to library operations.

Introduction

Many of us in the workforce spend a considerable amount of our work lives sitting in meetings, informally conversing with colleagues, and exchanging emails to accomplish our work. For a majority of our work, this works well enough and accomplishes what needs to be done. However, there are times when we are called upon to evaluate programs and services that may be near and dear to our hearts, to reduce our budgets by cutting services, or discuss priorities with a diverse group of colleagues. When these conversations are necessary, a framework for structured discussions to elicit fair and deliberate consideration benefits participants and helps produce the desired outcome with minimal internal friction.

The Start | Stop | Continue (SSC) framework is a popular tool in education for quickly eliciting constructive feedback from students. In the SSC framework, individuals list tasks that should be stopped, tasks that should be started, and tasks that should be continued. Libraries can adapt the SSC framework to use at their own organizations and provide opportunities for meaningful employee engagement to improve library operations, services, and programming.

Select Literature Review

Since the framework offers a structure for engaging employees in meaningful conversations about library operations and programming, our review of the literature encompasses both articles related to employee engagement and the SSC framework as it is used in education as well as the workplace.

Employee Engagement

What does it mean to be an engaged employee? Rao defines employee engagement as, "connecting the hands, heads, and hearts of the employees with the vision and mission of their organizations" (2017, 127). When employees are engaged, they care about their job, co-workers, their company and their company's future. When employees enjoy coming into the office every day and contributing their best work can be an indicator of successful employee engagement.

A select review of the literature reveals the importance of employee engagement. Since the mid-1980s, employee engagement has been established as a recognized concept in research literatures (Kunte and Rungrauange 2018, 433). Employee engagement tools such as the Affinity Process, Appreciative Inquiry, and Liberating Structures have been developed for

strategic planning, meetings, and decision-making processes. For example, Liberating Structures, helps engage employees during day-to-day meetings. Lipanowicz and McCandless developed Liberating Structure to help increase creativity during problem solving, and making sure everyone who attends meetings are heard (Bieraugel 2017, 426). Liberating Structures help alleviate power dynamics in meetings by making sure all attendees have a chance to participate in ways that are comfortable for them.

When employees are offered the chance to engage for decision-making purposes, they are more likely to have increased job satisfaction and retention (Kunte and Rungrauange 2018, 436). Another way to engage employee is by requesting employee feedback. Feedback from engaged employees can result in solutions to workplace issues and improvements to work processes. William Dougan, who was the president for the National Federation of Federal Employees in 2015, notes, "Organizations that tap into the innovation and creativity of the workforce by asking for employee ideas in solving problems will make better organizational decisions" (2015, 64). Feedback from meaningful employee engagement lends itself to meaningful solutions and decision making.

When libraries implement solutions or changes based off employee feedback, problems and issues are resolved at appropriate levels of the organization (Bourdon 1980, 29). This gives employees a sense of ownership and value in their library. There are many models and frameworks a library can use to establish an employee feedback system. For many libraries, initiating a feedback system that truly engages employees, can be a daunting and time-consuming process.

The Framework

A framework that can be initiated in library organizations with relative ease is the Start | Stop | Continue (SSC) framework. Founded in education theories, the SSC Framework "asks structured questions that collect student views on what educators should no longer do (stop), should consider adding (start) and features that should be retained (continue)" (Hoon, et al. 2015, 756). The basic framework includes working through a list of known and desired tasks and discussing which tasks should be started, which should be stopped and which should be continued. The SSC framework lends itself for students to clarify the significance of their instructor's teaching ("Start Stop Continue," 2016, 8). The framework teaches students how to offer constructive feedback.

Constructive feedback comes from constructive questions. A group of researchers studied students' qualitative feedback on teaching practices at three universities in the United Kingdom. The researchers found the students' qualitative feedback from evaluations using the SSC framework were more focused on improvements to teaching practices. Whereas, the qualitative feedback from evaluations using open-ended questions were more descriptive and did not focus on improvements to teaching practices (Hoon, et al. 2015, 761). When teachers know the type of evaluations they need, such as course development or improvements to teaching practices, the SSC framework can be easily tailored to the evaluation need.

The SSC framework also allows for a positive learning environment, where students direct results of their feedback. Strobino, who has used the SSC framework in her classroom, states, "I have found that, as I implement more student suggestions, their responses to the Stop and Start items decrease, while Continue comments increase. When I've not responded adequately to student feedback, a typical response in the Start column might challenge me to 'take heed to the evaluation results'" (1997, 6). Using the SSC framework for student

evaluations helps instructors understand which teaching practices needs to be developed, modified, or discontinued.

The SSC framework can go beyond the classroom. The framework has been used in the business world to obtain honest employee feedback. At Netflix, the SSC framework encourages employees to state what the company should start doing, something they should stop doing, and something they should continue doing (Watkins 2018). In academic libraries, the framework can motivate a project team to try alternatives to issues they may not have considered. All organizations benefit from constructive feedback. The value of the SSC framework is that it aids in evaluating for improvement purposes and making concrete decisions.

Using the Framework in Practice

At our library, our teams use the SSC framework when evaluating programs, services, and resources. These conversations have enabled us to honestly discuss and determine what is considered a core element of our library that should be maintained despite dwindling resources, what new initiatives we want to undertake to support changing needs on campus, and what might have been important at one time but is no longer meeting a campus need and can be stopped entirely. We have used the SSC framework with units to review individual programs, to discuss the suite of technologies offered and supported by the library, and as an administrative team to prioritize resource allocation after a budget cut.

Reviewing Programs and Initiatives

The SSC framework is ideal for reviewing individual elements that comprise larger programs. For example, if a library knows it wants to maintain reference services but the program needs review, the activity list might include different types of reference service (in-person, by phone, email, chat, SMS), different staffing levels (librarians, staff, graduate assistants, student workers), and other components such as hours of operation, training, and policies. Within the framework, each element of the program would be evaluated and discussed with the idea of starting something new, stopping an existing activity, or simply continuing an activity. This allows the team to easily evaluate each portion of a program or service and make needed adjustments in a constructive way. The framework ensures that all parts are thoughtfully considered and prevents the team from making assumptions about what should be continued as a matter of habit rather than a deliberate decision.

Sunsetting Technologies

Another example would be using the SSC framework to review the portfolio of technologies or platforms offered and used by the library. To do this, the team should begin the process with a list of technologies supported and/or used by the library. Depending on the composition of the team and the overall awareness of the big picture, it may be helpful for the list to include what services or functionality is supported by the technology. If the process is conducted with those responsible for managing the technologies, the discussions would focus on the usage and cost of each technology, how well it fit into the technological infrastructure, support required, and overall need for the product. Recommendations for starting, stopping, and continuing would stem from the team's assessment of those factors. At our library, when a similar review was conducted, many of the proposed "starts" were related to documenting existing platforms rather than starting new ones.

Getting Feedback from Student Workers

In many academic libraries, student workers are often an untapped resource for ideas. Many student workers staff the front-line service points such as circulation and computer lab support. They are both providers and consumers of library resources and services. As such, they have a unique perspective that, when channeled appropriately, can provide insight into student needs and preferences. Using the SSC framework, we solicited input from our student workers in user services to evaluate what was and was not working related to their jobs. The framework gave structure to the feedback received and yielded immediate, actionable results. Without prompting from their supervisors, the student workers identified many "starts" related to known issues the library had been grappling with for years, such as a need for better wayfinding and better instructions for using many of our core services. As part of the "continue" conversation, they made suggestions for improving what was already being done from making their name tags more visible to identifying better radios for communicating between service locations in the building. The student workers also recommended that we stop little used services like our SMS reference service. While we were not able to act on every suggestion made, involving students in a structured conversation and following up with them on actions taken or information gathered helped build trust among the team and opened the door for future idea sharing among the student workers and their supervisors.

Library-Wide Review of Services

Administrative teams might find the SSC framework useful for reviewing the entire suite of services, resources, and programming offered by the library system. In these situations, the value of SSC is that it allows participants to explore the idea of stopping certain tasks in order to create capacity and free up resources for starting new, strategic activities. Given the limited budgets of most academic libraries, it is not sustainable to continue to expand services and add resources to meet the evolving needs of faculty and students without considering which services and resources might be stopped to allow for the additions. When conducted at our library, we considered everything from recurring library publications and annual events to larger issues such as having subject librarians staff our reference desk.

When faced with staff vacancies that must remain unfilled given budgetary constraints, administrative teams might find it useful to conduct a SSC exercise with the duties listed in the job descriptions of the vacant positions. Of course, in this situation, the emphasis would be on the stop and continue rather than that start. This helps prioritize what must be continued and reassigned to remaining personnel and what can be put on hold for the foreseeable future.

Pro Tips

Set the scope and invite participants accordingly. The framework can be used in a number of ways to evaluate library programs and services from library-wide initiatives that impact many to individual programs that need fine-tuning. It is important to determine in advance what level of review is needed for your organization and then invite the appropriate personnel to participate. Those invited should have a working knowledge of the activities being evaluated and the ability to discuss implications for starting new initiatives and stopping existing services. To encourage maximum participation, participants should be familiar with one another, and groups should not be too large.

Rely on the team to compile the list for review. The organizer may want to start the list of review items, but it is a good idea to allow team members an opportunity to add to the list. This gives the entire team ownership in the process and creates a more robust list for review. It also prevents organizers from unintentionally inserting their biases into what is included and excluded from review.

Include sacred cows on the list for review. Every organization has activities they do that seem above reproach or off limits. For the SSC framework to be most effective, even those activities should be included in the process. While these activities may continue, it is possible that through discussion the team will have ideas about how to improve the activity or alter it in a meaningful way. It also makes the team members less defensive about activities under their purview on the list if the list is comprehensive and includes the organization's sacred cows.

Encourage honest, transparent conversation. Those participating in the process must feel comfortable honestly expressing their opinions and open to hearing what others say. When we used this process to evaluate a program after its first year of implementation, the supervisor recused herself from the conversation so that those on the front lines running the program could frankly discuss each item without fear of repercussion or pressure to continue something that was originally the supervisor's idea.

Honor decisions made (or set expectations accordingly). In an ideal world, teams conducting a SSC exercise have the autonomy and authority to make decisions as a group and then act on those decisions. If that is not the case, expectations should be stated at the outset so everyone participating has a clear understanding about what will be done as a result of the discussion. When we used this process to discuss sunsetting various technologies and platforms, the technology division understood that they were merely making recommendations for "stops" rather than making decisions. Since the decisions had implications across the organization, the list was put forth to library administration for final decisions.

Conclusion

The beauty of the Start | Stop | Continue framework lies in its simplicity and ease of use. It does not require investment in a tool, hours of preparation time for a facilitator, nor training for those participating. The framework works well for a variety of discussions, from a departmental review of a single service to a library-wide review of programming and resources, and with a wide variety of personnel, from part-time student workers to senior administrators. Those wishing to adopt this framework can easily start by creating a list of items for review and inviting their teams to participate in the conversation.

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