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Special Session - It's A Jungle Safari Out There: An Allegory for Learning to Navigate Academia

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Abstract - One of the key challenges at the beginning of an academic career is learning to live in the university working environment. Interactions between academics can be significantly different to those found in industry; and whilst many of the drivers for the organisation are similar, there are also some aspects that are unique to a university. Being able to successfully navigate through the office politics is exceptionally valuable to academic staff, both new and established. In order to do this, it is essential to understand what motivates both yourself and your colleagues. This workshop will use an African Safari as a metaphor for the academic working environment, allocating animals to represent some of the archetypes that are present within an Engineering department.

Index Terms – Departmental dynamics, Faculty Development, New Faculty

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GOALS OF THE SESSION

To provide participants with improved awareness of the dynamics of an academic department, and with new tools for navigating through this environment.

DESCRIPTION OF CONTENT OF SESSION

One of the key challenges at the beginning of an academic career is learning to live in the university working environment. Interactions between academics can be significantly different to those found in industry; and whilst many of the drivers for the organisation are similar, there are also some aspects that are unique to a university.

Being able to successfully navigate through the office politics is exceptionally valuable to academic staff, both new and established. In order to do this, it is essential to understand what motivates both yourself and your colleagues.

This workshop will use an African Safari as a metaphor for the academic working environment, allocating animals to represent some of the archetypes that are present within an Engineering department.

The intention is to explore the factors that motivate each of these animals / archetypes, and in doing so provide new academics with a framework for interacting more effectively with each of these types of colleagues. Participants will also be expected to self-identify with the archetypes presented, to encourage them to reflect upon how their colleagues perceive them.

The workshop presenters are believers in active learning, and there will be a strong expectation of participant involvement throughout the workshop.

SESSION AGENDA

The session is planned to run to the following timeline:

0-5 min: Participants self-identify with any animal.

5-20 min: Whole group goes through our seven featured animals, participants re-identify with our more constrained selections.

20-40 min: Split into seven groups (one per animal): Lion, wildebeest, gazelle, hippopotamus, birds, elephant, zebra. Groups identify what motivates each animal, how they are perceived, which department member this might be, and how they interact with each of the other animals.

40-70 min: Each group reports back to the main group; points of contention are identified where perceptions do not match.

70-80 min: Whole group attempts to reconcile discrepancies in perceptions, with particular reference to how these discrepancies are dangers to (opportunities for?) new faculty.

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80-85 min: Whole group discussion on animals we may have missed, or department members we may have missed
85-90 min: Wrap up

room fitout: a data projector, and whiteboard and/or flipcharts

DESCRIPTION OF ANTICIPATED AUDIENCE

The intended audience is new faculty, who will mostly be adapting from a graduate student perception of a department to a new faculty perception. It is useful, however, to have more experience colleagues in attendance, because then there will be first-person examples of all of the archetypes.

EQUIPMENT & MATERIALS

The presenters will provide printed handouts for each of the different animals to be discussed in the special session. The organizers will need to provide only the standard session

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