

Enhancing Team Understanding of Goals and Strategies Through Collaborative Project Teams

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1. Background

The Clinical Trials Office (CTO)'s Regulatory Affairs leaders observed decreased job satisfaction and decreased employee engagement in 2021-2022 as we were establishing a new normal of operations post pandemic. In the 2021 University of Minnesota employee engagement survey, only 50 percent of the regulatory staff responded favorably to the question "I understand what I can do to support my department's strategy and goals." The underlying issues that this question exposed formed the foundation of our Regulatory Affairs leaders' 2023 process improvement project.

2. Goals

Our goal was to improve job satisfaction and encourage engagement in larger CTO goals by giving regulatory staff more direct influence over the issues they identified as barriers to their work. At the same time, we wanted this project to provide new opportunities for the team to work together, both as a larger unit and in smaller project teams, to improve inter-team cooperation and cohesion.

3. Solutions and Methods

In early 2023, the Regulatory Affairs staff gathered to perform a SWOT Analysis and set strategic goals. The staff organized into four project teams, each focused on a different area of improvement. The teams were given direction to meet periodically to set goals and achieve results. Every three months, the Regulatory Affairs unit gathered in an in-person retreat to report on their progress. At the end of the year, the project teams reflected on the unmet goals: do any remain relevant for the coming year, what could have gone better?

4. Outcomes

The more successful project teams worked on goals that were under our control, such as creating educational opportunities inside our unit and identifying subject matter experts to specialize in various topics. Goals that required buy-in from other departments, such as communication improvements, were difficult to achieve results in under a year, and project teams found it hard to convert aspirational goals into well-defined achievable goals.

The University of Minnesota performed its biannual employee engagement survey in 2023. The Regulatory Affairs unit's results from this survey showed a marked improvement from the 2021 survey in many categories; in particular, the question that inspired this project improved from 50 percent to 100 percent favorable responses.

5. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Giving the regulatory staff ownership of process improvements helped drive a more engaged and connected team. Regulatory Affairs leaders continue to seek a balance between giving the team room to find creative solutions and having leadership better narrow the goals everyone is working towards.

We are iterating on this model for team-driven process improvement in 2024. In an early 2024 team retreat, our staff ideated a list of goals that combined both unfinished projects from last year and new goals that are focused on the low scoring survey results from 2023. We will refine our project teams'

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methods by setting “SMART” goals and by celebrating individuals’ goal attainment, while continuing the practice of reporting on progress in quarterly in-person team retreats.