

Renewed Partnerships:

Where People Come First and the Business of Research Compliance Follows

By Roseann Luongo and Denise Moody

Research administrators are continuously challenged to develop, communicate, manage, and enforce institutional policies and federal regulations with many internal and external constituents to include faculty, researchers, central and department administrators, peer institutional collaborators, sponsors, agencies, and auditors. Most recently, the Uniform Guidance has gone into effect, and research administrators have been collaborating nationwide to ensure that their institutions are fully compliant. At the same time, faculty and researchers are faced with administrative burden as described in the National Science Board report on *Reducing Investigators' Administrative Workload for Federally Funded Research* (2014).

What is the key to achieving research compliance while not overburdening our faculty and fellow administrators? Focus on people and renewing partnerships first; research compliance will follow. We contend that there are five key competencies that a research administrator needs to establish to effectively balance customer service and compliance.

1. Strong working relationships

If trust is the foundation, then strong working relationships are the mortar that help us build effective and productive organizations to achieve the research mission. Strong working relationships, overtime can lead to well-founded external and internal partnership. We invest time for developing strong levels of expertise, through training and other methods. Similarly, we must have the commitment for developing working relationships. Developing and managing their relationships helps institutions build strong internal control systems of compliance. These systems include strong communication, clear roles and

responsibilities, collaborative business processes, and effective monitoring procedures.

Strong relationships and trust enhance our customer service ability, facilitate enforcement of policies and procedures, and help us accomplish tasks. They can make having a difficult conversation, about unallowable costs, write-offs, or non-compliance, a little easier. An established relationship with an IRB administrator may help when you need a protocol expedited — you won't only know who to call, but the person on the other end of that call will be more willing to go that extra mile to help you in an urgent situation.

Keys to developing strong working relationships include the following:

Focus on people 1st, business 2nd.

It is important to make a personal connection first; once you have established the basis of your relationship, the business naturally follows.

Respect opinions. We may not always see eye to eye with colleagues or administrators, but it is important to try to understand and respect their point of view on issues.

Listen and communicate. Active listening is essential for creating a valued partnership. Effective working relationships also need frequent, open, relevant, and direct communication. Our colleagues and faculty need information, in varied forms and at different times, depending on the situation. We need to be flexible and adapt our communication styles according to the individual and the need at any given time.

2. Trust

Warren Buffet once said, *"Trust is like the air we breathe. When it's present, no one really*

notices...when it's absent, everyone notices." Trust is as critical to working relationships as air and breath is to life. Trust is the foundation of our relationship with our sponsors. If sponsors do not trust that our institutions can manage research funds with care and are committed to following through with the work that was proposed, then they will not grant us research funding. The same methodology applies to our relationships as research administrators with Principal Investigators (PIs) and collaborators. If PIs and collaborators did not trust our expertise and commitment to the work, then they would neither rely on us for advice nor invest their time in a relationship with us. The foundation of our relationships with sponsors, PIs, employees, and collaborators is trust and that is as important as the *"air we breathe"*.

We can build trust by:

1. building a network of collaboration and teamwork through time and shared experiences.
2. communicating openly, frequently, and honestly.
3. Providing a high-level of customer service through responsiveness and following through.

3. Collaboration/Teamwork

Forming strong working relationships and building trust with your colleagues and faculty, fosters a more collaborative, team-building environment that lends itself to accomplishing the task at-hand. Federal regulation updates often result in an institution's need to develop new or update existing policies, procedures, and/or systems. Often, institutions are provided a short turnaround time for development,

communication, training, and implementation in response to a federal mandate. Therefore, people and resources must be rapidly and strategically organized to problem-solve and implement the necessary changes. Policy, procedures, and/or systems updates must be implemented in full collaboration with the key constituents.

Successful teamwork and collaboration will result in better understanding of and a higher compliance rate for adherence to the new regulation. It is the result of a consensus-driven approach rather than a top-down approach and must be formed on the basis of trust. A team leader must be strong and have the ability to steer a team in the right direction while producing timely and effective results. Spreier states that “A leader’s hunger to achieve... fuels innovation, productivity, and growth... But taken to an extreme, overachievers command and coerce employees rather than coach and collaborate with them... eroding organizational performance, demolishing trust, and undermining morale” (2006). In other words, collaboration is essential. Heifetz states that while “It’s tempting to go it alone when leading a change initiative... It’s also foolish. You need to recruit partners, people who can help protect you from attacks and who can point out potentially fatal flaws in your strategy or initiative” (2002).

When new policies, procedures, or systems are developed, ensure that the team is thoroughly represented and that there is sufficient time to allow for feedback from an even wider constituency. If a policy or system is released without vast user input, the likelihood that people will support, understand, and adhere to the requirements is reduced. Alternatively, successful teamwork and wide collaboration foster mutual understanding and support even the most onerous of new federal mandates.

4. Communication

Effective communication is essential for a research administrator, especially when conveying a new policy in response to a federal regulation update, which can often be perceived as onerous or contentious. First, communication within the research administration office is essential, since these “front-liners” are the staff members who must fully understand the policy and/or systems updates, respond to any questions from external constituents, and ensure compliance with the new federal

regulations. Internal staff training should focus on the reasons behind the policy (the “Why”) in order to clearly communicate and provide an explanation to other administrators and faculty.

Next, communication to faculty, department administrators, and other central offices must be effective and efficient. The media type, timing, and content for communication must all be taken into account when conveying a message such as a release of a new research policy. The communication must reach a broad audience, contain the most relevant points, and be easily understood. How often have you received an email blast at your institution that conveys a new institutional policy, but you stop reading after scrolling once or twice down the page? Not only should a policy be easily understood, but the communication message regarding the policy should be even more succinct. Otherwise, the audience and the message are lost altogether.

5. Customer Service Focus

Successful research administrators view all of their constituents, including sponsors, faculty, administrators, and collaborators as their customer base. Knowing who comprises your customer base, or circle of key stakeholders, is important. This circle could be much broader than initially thought. Placing primary importance on customers’ needs helps to develop and sustain positive customer relationships, which is essential when attempting to develop and release a new policy in response to a federal mandate.

A positive customer service attitude requires social skills. Goleman states “Socially skilled people are proficient in managing relationships and building networks and are able to find common ground and build rapport... which leads to effectiveness in leading change, persuasiveness, and expertise in building and leading teams.” Social skill is “not just a matter of friendliness but friendliness with a purpose: moving people in the direction you desire” (2004).

Finally, good customer service requires the research administrator to listen first to the needs of the customer. NCURA’s Holm and Ventimiglia state “A leader should seek input, must want to listen, and must “actively” listen” (2006/2007). The same traits apply to successfully developing and implementing a new policy or system in response to a federal update.

Successful research administration and research compliance oversight involves first listening to the customer needs and then balancing those needs with maintaining compliance with the federal regulations.

Conclusion

Without these five key competencies in place, policy enforcement and research compliance are unachievable. The common theme for all competencies is that people and partnerships come first, and the business side of research administration and compliance then follow naturally. Mutual respect, greater listening skills, and collaborative teamwork can, over time, build effective relationships and trust. In the end, research administrators might (just might!) achieve full compliance through a collegial and even enjoyable process. ■

References

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