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UM STAFF TRIES MANAGEMENT JAPANESE-STYLE

By Annette Trinity
University Relations Office
University of Montana

MISSOULA--

The University of Montana staff is trying a new approach to problem solving and planning based on the adage that two heads are better than one.

Last November, several departments on campus started a new program that directly involves employees in office decision making.

According to Lynda Brown, director of personnel services, the program uses small groups of employees from the same or related offices to identify, research and eventually solve a work-related problem.

Brown said participation in the groups, called quality circles, is voluntary, but so far the response is positive. With five circles operating now, several more are in the planning phase.

The circles differ from a committee or task force because the circles are ongoing, she said. Meeting once weekly, the circles can tackle anything from improper lighting to work distribution, except for personnel grievances and collective bargaining, which the union handles.

A group can work on a problem for a year if it needs to, compiling statistics, graphs and charts, if necessary, before presenting its solution to a supervisor for approval.

(over)

UM staff tries management--add one

"One of the keys is that five or six heads are better than one," she said.

The idea behind quality circles originated in the United States, according to Brown, but was first used in Japanese industries after World War II to improve productivity and product quality. Although widely successful in Japan, quality circles weren't used in the United States until 1972 when the aerospace industry started a program based on the Japanese model.

From there it spread to several other large industries including Hewlett-Packard and IBM. In the last five years, quality circles have spread from the private to the public sector, with the idea just taking hold in some universities. She said UM is one of fewer than 10 universities nationwide now using the circles.

While UM is service- rather than product-oriented, Brown said quality circles can improve those services by giving employees more control over their work environment.

"We can provide better services if the staff is involved," she said.

The circles are not only problem-oriented, she added, but are also good for long-term staff development.

"The goal is to improve service and morale and make the work place a little more challenging and interesting."

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