"It was the best of times. It was the worst of times." The beginning of a great story. My story begins like this. I am Amy Armstrong and I’m an archivist at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas here in Austin. I've worked at the Center for 11 years. I process collections and supervise four archivists in the Archives Cataloging Unit. I am sharing this story with you and feeling a little nervous. I am going to be very transparent and honest. Not to make the Center look bad; it's an organization like any other. No place is perfect. But because I want you to understand the context and hopefully inspire y'all to write their own story.
The Ransom Center celebrates stories. This building holds pages printed with words telling the world's most important stories. Here we have the Gutenberg Bible, GGM's copy of Love in the Time of Cholera with his edits, a note from the Woodward and Bernstein Watergate papers, and a draft fragment of Adrienne Kennedy's Funhouse of a Negro. Stories are about people, events, adversity, courage, life. Buildings also have stories. Buildings are also about people, events, adversity, courage, life.
The Ransom Center is made up of 6 divisions, 21 departments (some are a department on one), 10 units, 1 director, 5 curators, 5 associate directors, 84 staff members, around 23 student workers, 5-10 interns, and 8 security guards. We employ librarians, archivists, museum professionals, educators, scholars, accountants, artists, techies, and many people with liberal arts degrees. Our most recent staff hired has been at the HRC for about 2 months and there is an archivist who has been at the HRC for over 50 years. Some of us are native Texans, most of us are from other states; and the countries of Canada, Columbia, France, Spain, and Taiwan are represented.
Organizations like the Ransom Center have Silos. We have professional silos. Departmental silos. Floor Silos. If you sliced off the side of our building, this is what it would look like. 5 Curators are on the 7th floor; 1 curator is on the 6th floor; digitization and digital collection services is on the 5th floor; librarians archivists, conservators, and exhibit prep is on the 4th floor; the director's office, HR, finance, marketing, and public-facing offices are on the 3rd floor; the reading room and public services is on the 2nd floor, and guards, a welcome desk, and our exhibition space is on the 1st floor. We have a "Floor Culture." People are wrapped up in their work and pay attention only to what's happening on their floor. Some rarely leave their desk, OR their floor.
We also have a distinct Organizational Culture that includes over 50 years of history. Changes in leadership, cultural and societal shifts in workplace culture, new modes of communication, new technology, evolving institutional priorities, turf wars, and the stereotype of library personalities have created a Ransom Center culture that can be imposing and difficult to crack. Yours truly had been at the HRC about 8 months at the time this picture was taken. Almost a year at that point and I still felt very lonely at work.
So we have a building that discourages staff interaction, silo-ed departments, and an unwelcoming organizational culture. Actually, there are some pockets that are very welcoming, but in general, this is what we've got. This leads to communication issues, feeling isolated and disconnected, maybe a lack of engagement. All of that can lead to low morale. Terry Patterson NYT best-selling author of the book *Crucial Conversations* says "Work is too time-consuming and life-absorbing not to provide us with lots of positive emotions. Anything less would be a tragedy."
So how do we know that the Ransom Center has a problem? A Staff Satisfaction survey conducted in 2013 showed 67% of staff surveyed described their work at the HRC as "Very Meaningful". But when asked "how satisfied are you with your job?"; only 43.9% of those surveyed said "very satisfied." So, the majority finds meaning in the tasks they do, but a majority have problems with everything surrounding where and how they do it. On the same survey, staff were asked: "how likely are you to look for another job outside the HRC in the next 2-3 years?" Here are the results. Another way to look at it....Every highlighted name on this phone list from Spring 2016 is a person who no longer works at the Ransom Center. That’s 39 people in less than 4 years. Some of these are retirements, but that is still a lot of people.
In 2015, I decided to try to do something about it. More out of wanting to get my own needs met, actually. But also, if things can be better, shouldn't we all try? I wrote an 8-page proposal to form a Staff Engagement Committee. I had shared it with a few staff to get their feedback and incorporated their suggestions. I laid out the problem, the benefits of addressing it, possible solutions, a table that showed 5 focus areas with possible outcomes, and suggestions for programs and activities. I can't remember the exact date I wrote this, but I DO know that I did nothing with it. I didn't have--if you know Brene Brown--I didn't have the courage to make myself vulnerable and be seen. I wasn't willing to take this risk. I didn't feel safe speaking up.
That is, until the HRC got a new HR Director who came in with a master's degree in Human Dimension of Organizations, a fresh and modern outlook on the workplace, and a willingness to try new things. Elizabeth Matlock started at the HRC in October 2016. She was just the ally I needed. I shared my proposal with her, one thing led to another, we met with one of the ADs, and we submitted a more succinct proposal—with a budget—to our Director and ADs, and the PEER committee was born. Members would spend no more than 3 hours a month and commit to serving at least 1 year. Elizabeth and I, as co-chairs, met and planned how we believed the PEER should be structured.
We wanted representation from across the floors and departments, but we wanted to cap membership at 10; a manageable number. We identified staff members who had already expressed or demonstrated an interest in putting events together for staff, had a lot of enthusiasm, and who could think outside of the box. Marketing is everything, so I made stationery, and we sent formal letters inviting the staff we selected to join PEER. Some people declined, so we decided to open up the last two seats to any staff member. An early suggestion by the AD we met with was to include one AD that could serve as a liaison with the leadership team and could advocate for PEER projects, so an AD was invited and we had our group. On April 5th 2017, we had the first meeting.

THE CHARGE

“PEER will focus on promoting a positive work culture through learning opportunities designed to empower staff to be more effective, recognizing and encouraging innovation and creativity, generating enthusiasm, and increasing communication across the institution. PEER activities will focus on creating a stronger sense of community among all Ransom Center staff. PEER can also serve as a resource for supervisors.” -PEER Proposal, February 2017
One thing Elizabeth and I had not decided was how PEER should go about working on projects. Should there be subcommittees based on the 5 focus areas detailed in the original proposal? Should we have a project leader for each project who would then solicit volunteers from PEER? We wanted members to contribute ideas, so there would be a shared sense of ownership. At the first meeting we decided the first project would be putting together end-of-year Finals goody bags for our student workers and interns. But before we got too far along, we sent a survey to get ideas from staff. We included 5 questions to gauge current level of staff satisfaction; one we could use as a baseline for future surveys. We hit the ground running with programs; including hosting monthly center-wide birthday parties and chairing the holiday party committee.
The PEER members all felt strongly that we didn't want the committee to be viewed as a party-planning or social committee. The PEER staff survey we sent out offered a place for comments and many staff took that opportunity to share suggestions about policies; including location of offices, raises and performance evaluations, id photos, break areas, and public service hours and staff's ability to attend events. The HRC had also just completed a 2016 general staff survey and the results were very similar to those from 2013. So, at an early meeting, PEER discussed some of these issues. In particular, reading room hours on holiday weekends. After heated discussions, the AD offered to step down from PEER and Elizabeth and I agreed that the presence of an AD put that person in a very uncomfortable position.
Over time, PEER membership changed, as staff left the HRC to take other jobs, got too busy with their actual jobs, or just got a little burned out. We hosted monthly birthday parties, several large seasonal parties, hosted happy hours, coordinated meal trains for staff, implemented a sustainability subcommittee, coordinated nominees for University awards, and planned a "Take your child to work day". PEER also was asked to help rollout a new food and drink policy which would require coordinating a new breakroom. Additionally, PEER continued to advocate for changes in policy; including recommendations for a gender-neutral restroom and establishing clear and transparent policies for merit raises and performance evaluations. We also worked on addressing communication issues, including brainstorming new formats for all-staff meetings. We also added a second monthly meeting.
This is the last panel from the cartoon. PEER members were starting to feel the burn. An effort to get more participation from staff was launched...The Friends of PEER. People often were interested in helping, but didn't want to serve on the committee. But this group was relatively inactive. One of the biggest changes hit PEER in March 2018 when Elizabeth Matlock left the Center. She was the head of HR, my co-chair, and PEER's only liaison to the Director and the ADs. This sort of put everyone in a tailspin and there was a lot of uncertainty about the future of PEER. Would the new HR Director be interested in co-chairing? Was I still interested in co-chairing? Elizabeth's assistant, who was also active on PEER, was hired to replace her and was committed to keeping PEER the same.
In August 2018, PEER issued an annual report first to the Directors and then to the staff. The Director met with us and shared his appreciation for PEER bringing people together and his shared wish of a healthy work culture. There was concern that staff saw PEER as the place to go for personnel issues and had taken on issues that were better handled by the organizational structures already in place. There was also a desire for the co-chairs to increase monthly communication with him, so he could be in a better position to make PEER successful. In September, PEER sent a survey to staff to gather feedback about past programming and ask for suggestions for future programming.
In September PEER members gathered for a full day retreat to celebrate the year's achievements and plan for the year. The morning was spent watching a couple of videos and discussing modules from the UC Berkeley Greater Good Science Center course, Greater Happiness at Work. We also discussed the results from the PEER staff survey, which was interesting. 34 staff members responded; that's a little less than half. 59% said they understood the goals of PEER and how it contributes to HRC initiatives. 88% of staff surveyed either somewhat or strongly agreed that PEER events and activities have improved the workplace culture. When comments were provided, they were mostly positive. Though one person thought having a monthly birthday party was too frequent and one person said basically I am unlikely ever attend a PEER event. Then later we broke into the five subcommittees to strategize programming and the staff members they wanted to recruit.
After the subcommittee launch, PEER got a response from six interested staff members. In the meantime, eight members left the group. The top row represents the membership at the beginning of PEER in April 2017. The Xs indicate PEER members who left the HRC. The black ghostbuster signs represent people who stepped down. The color indicates an individual's continuity. The last line represents the PEER membership at the end of 2018. It was clear the subcommittee model wasn’t sustainable either. To make some of it sustainable, the responsibility for birthday planning was given to an administrative asst in the Director’s office. HR took over planning professional development (which it always sort of did), and sustainability was added to the building manager position.
The future of PEER seems tenuous and uncertain. In January 2019, PEER had one original member standing. The six new members added some renewed energy, enthusiasm, and ideas, but they have been left holding a hot potato. PEER kind of imploded around them and they were left without a clear idea of how the group should operate, who should lead it, or even what the charge of the group should be. I was one of the people who stepped down and I feel a lot of guilt about what happened and disappointment that it couldn't continue the way it had. The new group has focused on planning birthday parties at this point and attempted to schedule a staff picnic, but it had to be postponed because logistics were difficult to figure out. The group is moving without direction.
I have thought a lot about what happened and trying to figure it all out. What were the obstacles? What should we have done differently? A lot of what PEER worked on required a lot of time and emotional energy from members. So, the obstacles. A staff with very low morale; so embedded, it made it difficult for some people to even attend PEER activities. An ineffective reporting structure that made it impossible to report up and out. Pushback when trying to suggest different ways of doing things. A sense that we were a rogue group, operating outside the structures of formal authority. Some things PEER should have done differently. We tried to do too much, too fast. We burned ourselves out. The co-chairs should have established a regular meeting to report directly to all of the Directors. We should have established the committee structure earlier and recruit volunteers from all of the staff. Like in many workplaces, it’s always the usual suspects who get involved.
Ultimately, PEER didn’t really become part of the organizational culture. For the most part, Managers neither discouraged nor encouraged their staff to attend events. Leadership often didn’t model this behavior themselves, so PEER always seemed on the margins. It’s discouraging to put all of yourself into something and have low turnout. The most successful event we had was last year’s Spring family picnic. When I look at this picture...well the first thing I think is wow what a lot of white people. And then I think about how happy everyone looks. Maybe if we had done things differently, PEER would have become part of the culture and this story would have a different ending.