What is expected of library managers in a new democracy?

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Introduction

The international library world will most probably witness many changes on the South African library scene in the next two to five years. A number of changes have already taken place as a direct result of the political and social changes that have occurred in South Africa since the election of a new democratic government in 1994.

In order to adapt our university libraries to the ongoing changes in a broad spectrum of society, we will need library managers with the ability and the commitment to recognize the new expectations and demands, and to respond effectively and speedily to them.

What are the expectations and demands currently faced by library managers in South Africa - including managers of technological university libraries?

Expectations of the newly elected democratic government

Government's expectations regarding tertiary educational institutions can be summarised as follows:

- Affirmative action must be implemented. Government expects institutions to be increasingly representative of the total South African population. This means that
the staff composition of institutions will have to be representative of the total population in terms of race and gender.

The goals and aims of the country's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) must be achieved. The RDP, in brief, "is an instrument for transforming government and society. It is intended to make government more transparent and accountable to the people...[and] it also transforms society to take the leading role and responsibility for their own development in the process of reconstructing South Africa." ¹

Systems and institutions of higher education must be transformed at both macro and micro levels. This implies a transformation in terms of identity, goals, demography, structure, funding, governance and development roles².

Expectations of governing bodies (i.e. universities and technikons)

Institutions of higher education, such as universities and technikons, expect their library managers to adapt to government expectations and the new environment as quickly as possible. In more specific terms the following are implied:

- Priorities must be changed to promote organizational change, affirmative action, training and participatory management. Regarding the last, library managers are expected to involve trade unions, community leaders and student representatives in the establishment of advisory committees.

- Changes in management skills. If they do not already possess these skills, library managers should acquire negotiation and mediation skills and conflict resolution skills and they must transform their leadership style from being authoritarian leaders, they must adapt a participative style.

- Changes in value systems. It means that university and technikon libraries have to reflect the changing underlying values and norms of a society in transition³. Libraries should, for example, change values to shared values and consensus.

- Participation in social reconstruction. This includes issues such as community upliftment and the development of life-skills programmes, with the aim of
redressing past imbalances. It also infers that university and technikon libraries must use their resources to the benefit of communities they previously considered as the domain of public libraries.

The qualities of adaptability, empathy and sensitivity, tolerance, determination and pro-activeness must be cultivated in order to manage the changes that are expected and demanded from them.

Expectations and demands of library staff

Library managers will find that workforce expectations in a new democracy are very different from those in a previous dispensation. In a new democracy the emphasis falls much more on labour relations, worker education and worker rights.

Library managers will therefore have to deal with expectations and demands like the following:

Empowerment. Library workers expect their managers to provide them with the skills, ability, space and time to exercise a substantial influence over any decisions that affect their working lives and work environment. This includes influencing such issues as recruitment and selection of team members, promotion and appointment of team members or managers, and evaluation of their own performance and that of their managers.

Transparency. Library staff expect library managers to demonstrate openness and honesty about the university and the library policies, procedures, rules and regulations. This includes giving library staff access to sources of power and to managerial information systems.

Flattened management structures. The demand for flattened management structures is closely related to demands and expectations regarding empowerment and transparency. In a new democracy workers expect flexible levels of control, shortened chains of command and, above all, high involvement and participation in planning and decision making.
Equity. Library staff expect equal employment opportunities. In addition, previously disadvantaged staff members expect help and training to catch up with their colleagues.

Recognition of staff rights and basic human rights. This includes the right to fair labour practices, the right to a healthy environment, the right to assemble and demonstrate peacefully and to associate with whomever one wishes.

Expectations and demands of library users

In a new democracy student expectations and demands boil down to four interrelated issues, namely access, equity, relevance and participation.

Access. Student bodies and other library users expect there to be no barriers between them and the library’s resources. This means that library managers will have to pay special attention to matters such as library opening times and the location and design of service points. Library managers, in consultation with user forums, will also have to rethink the concepts of user fees and censorship, and the concept of diversifying services between different user categories.

Equity. Users also expect library managers to provide the full range of library services and facilities equally to all users, regardless of educational or financial ability.

Relevant services. In a new democracy there is a much greater demand for services relevant to the needs of the community. In South Africa, for example, there is a growing demand that university and technikon libraries should channel more time and resources into the purchasing of prescribed books, basic text books and audiovisual material. A great demand also exists for more study facilities, library orientation and training in the use of library collections and services. Students also expect library collections and services to reflect changing curricula and values with no delay.
Participation in all matters that involve users. It is expected that libraries should be democratically developed and managed in cooperation and consultation with the users so that the collections and services are relevant to the needs and diversity of the users. Library users also expect library managers and management resources to be readily accessible.

Conclusion

People usually have high expectations of a new democracy and South Africa is no exception. In many cases citizens not only expect certain results from the new government or society - they demand these results. It is therefore, imperative, that library managers take note of and respond to the expectations and demands put to them.

Library managers must be willing and able to meet these expectations and demands. Any attempt by library managers to place these expectations and demands at the lower end of their strategic objective schedules will not only have negative implications for their future careers, but will also have negative results for their libraries.

References