Inside Pandora's Box-Navigating Permanent "White-water" of Organizational Change

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Abstract: Change in today’s organizations is not only constant, it is often turbulent. All jobs in libraries will be affected in the days ahead. This eventually has enormous implications for all campus libraries. This paper explores the nature and types of change. A realistic change model is presented along with useful change and planning strategies.

Introduction

Initiating or responding to changes in our work environments is now a way of life for most of us. Staffs frequently work under enormous stress often accomplishing much more than they appreciate. For some, it helps to simply step back and ask oneself: “What am I doing today that I couldn’t do ten years ago, and what tools am I using that weren’t available then?” Were you working with online catalogs, sending and receiving faxes and email, was a personal computer sitting on your desk, could you be reached with a pager, did you surf the Internet and retrieve information from Web sites? Such a list of changes could be extended almost indefinitely. Most staff are actually surprised when we are reminded of how much change we have assimilated into our personal and work lives. And in an organizational context, many libraries have done more than simply survive, they have thrived. This is quite remarkable in light of the number of times we have been told by officials and technologists that the death of libraries is eminent.

All farsighted organizations are searching for ways to prepare themselves for the twenty-first century. Reinventing, reengineering, process engineering, benchmarking, TQM programs, strategic planning, etc. are the buzz-words of the nineties. All reflect strategies that are being applied to facilitate organizational change.

Corporations such as IBM, Ford Motor Company, and Motorola have embarked on ambitious programs of change. Their goals are to stay economically viable and improve their competitive advantage. AT&T has virtually transformed itself since the company was broken up over a decade ago by the federal courts. We are already beginning to witness similar transformational activity in the telecommunications industry as the giants of the industry jockey to achieve competitive advantages.

The scope of change has also been transformed. It wasn’t too long ago when we thought of national boundaries when we talked about change but that is no longer the case. Now we must keep in mind that change in corporations, and even libraries, transcends national boundaries. Organizational change has become global in the same sense that national economies have become global.

Universities and the Changing Environment

Change in universities has not been nearly as dramatic as in the corporate sector. Of course, plenty of change is evident, but on close examination one finds that most universities have remained fundamentally pretty much the same. And while technological tools have become ubiquitous on campuses, the experiences of most students and faculty have only recently begun to be markedly changed.

There are many explanations for why change has lagged in the academic sector. Most of them are quite familiar to academic librarians.

* Campus visions of the future aren’t truly shared visions; faculty aren’t excited by top down administratively inspired visions; and consequently aren’t willing to commit to their achievement;
* Faculty are customarily focused on their own work; while they intellectually understand the need for change, they don’t feel a sense of urgency for change in their department or university;
* Job security and tenure policies obviate the need to undertake changes that are viewed as burdensome or intellectually undesirable, e.g. using information technology in the classroom.

Most institutions of higher education in the U.S. have not yet reached the point where change is unavoidable, but I’m convinced here is little justification for feeling complacent about the long-term health of higher education. Academics would be well advised to shake free from the organizational lethargy that currently prevails at so many institutions and initiate actions that are long overdue, and which are needed to ensure the long-term viability of their institutions. Leadership is desperately needed.

A couple of years ago, Gerhard Casper, the president of Stanford University, urged a group of higher education leaders to prepare their institutions for high-tech competitors of the future by defining their institutions’ value to society. He predicted “… distance-learning technologies [will] have a profound impact on universities as they blur the lines between high school, college, and advanced...
degrees and enhance the shift to 'life-long learning.' It seems to me many institutions are already headed down the highway toward the learning environment Casper predicts.

Regardless of the turbulence that may surround academic institutions, can we realistically expect transformational change to occur in the foreseeable future? I'd like to think the answer is yes, but I'm afraid that wouldn't be a realistic expectation. Universities are segmented organizations. Individual units rarely share common visions, in fact the visions of individual units are often in conflict with the aspirations of other units. At present it is easier for an individual unit to transform itself than it is for the institution itself. Because change in universities is likely to be so slow, universities may increasingly find themselves in competition with "new types" of educational agencies. For example, corporations will become more pro-active as educational agencies because of their need for trained workers; technical and vocational schools will serve high school students who seek to master technology skills; and distance distributed programs will educate students who seek work-related skills and adults who seek to change careers. Such programs already dot the landscape. Developments in multimedia and telecommunications assure us that the quality and cost effectiveness of distributed education programs will gradually become more competitive with the traditional approaches.

I'm not suggesting that universities will disappear, but I'm afraid that the ability of many institutions to compete for students will decline and thus test their economic viability. In fact, if the external threats posed by economic constraints and technology continue to intensify, some institutions may be forced to abandon programs and lay-off faculty. Some private schools may even have to close their doors. Hopefully, before these trends become irreversible, influential academics, particularly teaching faculty will begin to view needed organizational changes with greater receptivity.

Transformational Change

Change management gurus today talk about the need for transformational change. They believe strategies that introduce change incrementally, which is the case with TQM programs, will not produce the degree of change that will be needed to ensure success in the twenty-first century.

Joel Barker, who is probably the person who first used the term "paradigm shift" to describe transformation change in organizations, stresses the need for an organization to have a vision of where it wants to go. He believes the vision must be exciting and stretch the organization, and while he believes that a vision ought to originate with management, he also stresses the need for staff support in order to gain staff buy-in for the vision.

Michael Hammer and James Champy, also organizational experts, urge that organizations reinvent themselves. They argue that "... corporations must undertake nothing less than a radical re-invention of how they do their work ..." And while this may sound extreme they believe there is little alternative to radical action if a company wishes to keep its door open in the twenty-first century.

Stan Davis is more specific in his vision of what twenty-first century organizations must do in order to be successful.

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He believes they must exhibit the capacity to provide services, any place and at any time, and they must be able to tailor their products and services to meet the needs of each customer. The common thread running through all of these messages is that organizations must change radically if they hope to succeed in the next century.

Change and Libraries

The imperative to remain competitive as markets become global, and as companies race to introduce new products into the marketplace, provides a compelling rationale for change in corporations. A similar sense of urgency does not exist in the not-for-profit sectors. For examples, librarians talk endlessly about change, and while changes have certainly occurred, they are almost always incremental in nature.

But is this pattern of change necessarily bad? How urgent is the need for transformational change in libraries? Carla Stoffle and her colleagues at the University of Arizona are among those who believe transformational change is essential. In a recent paper they challenged academic librarians to adopt drastic new approaches to organizing libraries. They argue that to achieve visions, libraries will have to reengineer the way they are organized, how services are delivered, and how they are governed.

While I philosophically agree with Stoffle and her colleagues, I’m not optimistic that we can expect change in academic libraries to occur more rapidly or be more startling than what occurs in our parent institutions. We must keep in mind that librarians are rarely able to act as free agents because they are integral parts of larger communities. They work in a highly political environment and they share deeply-rooted campus cultures and traditions. As a result, organizational change, at least for the foreseeable future, is more likely to remain incremental than to become transformational.

What are change management experts telling us about the future of organizations, and what are the implications for libraries? Craig Hickman identifies a continuum of strategies beginning with the classical continuous improvement method, i.e., incremental change to revolutionary approaches such as those advocated by Hammer and Champy. Hickman also identifies other strategies including synthesis of best industry practices, focusing on and empowering teams and reengineering work processes. My work with organizations convinces me that the most commonly-used strategy in libraries is still a top-down, incremental approach, but with a growing tendency to empower staff groups through a team approach to problem solving. A few libraries are also taking more seriously the need to reengineer work processes.

The change strategy a library selects to plan and implement change is extremely important. The era when a library director assisted by administrative associates, even with participation of selected staff, can expect to create a plan and expect staff simply to follow directions and implement such imposed changes has come to an end. It is no longer an effective strategy for introducing and implementing extensive programs of change. The reasons why this is the case should become obvious in the sections that follow.

While top-down directives from a library director’s office were probably never as effective as many thought they were, we should also acknowledge that a great deal of change has occurred in recent years regardless of the process employed. But top-down strategies are becoming less effective because organizational environments are becoming less stable and the time frames in which change must occur are becoming shorter and shorter.

Peter Vail says that today’s organizations must be able to navigate in permanent “white-water.” Vail points out that most traditional organizations are not structured for rapid change in a turbulent white-water environment. He likens today’s organizations to flat-bottomed houseboats that are perfectly stable on a placid lake, but would inevitably flounder in the turbulence of white-water. What we now need, says Vail, are organizations that resemble kayaks that are nimble and agile and able to negotiate white-water. How would you characterize academic libraries? What about book and periodical vendors? Are these organizations houseboats or kayaks?

The need for flexibility raises serious questions, at least in my mind, regarding the efficacy of traditional strategic planning processes as tools for introducing change. One needs to be wary of processes that are slow and which stretch out a change process over an extended period of time. More powerful processes are needed for this era of constant and turbulent change. An organization needs to be nimble and take advantage of windows of opportunity when they occur. An organization must never feel that it is bound by “the plan.” A formal strategic document is likely to be outdated before the written copies are distributed. Organizations need change processes that are flexible and facilitate forward movement quickly.

I learned the importance of flexibility in strategic planning back in 1984 when our staff at Michigan was in the initial stages of implementing a staff-driven strategic plan. The plans included steps to introduce gradually desktop computers into the work environment, but we threw these plans out overnight when a computer hardware company unexpectedly offered to cut a deal that would enable us to purchase 75 PCs with software packages that included spreadsheet, word processing and communications capabilities.

I was really excited because this was a real campus coup for the library. Since the campus was already networked, we would be able to tie all units together, regardless of their location on campus, into a single, cohesive network. This network would change the way we communicated in the library and the way we conducted our affairs.

I assumed that others would feel the same way, and while most staff were equally excited, there were also a number of staff members who objected to our precipitous action. They reminded us that there was nothing in our strategic plan about such an acquisition. Why hadn’t I consulted them before making such a decision? They had a point, but the window of opportunity didn’t permit time for a formal staff review. It was clear that we had become too tightly bound by our “plan.” We needed greater flexibility. Today a planning process needs to be more flexible and more agile, and the plan itself is likely to become an obstacle to change rather than a road map to a vision.

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Change Models

The literature of change management is full of change models. Kurt Lewin created the classic model for describing organizational change. He believed that one prepared an organization for change, made the change, and once the change was completed, the organization returned to a business as usual mode of operation. He called this unfreezing, making the change and refreezing the organization. In such an environment, staff could realistically expect that once a change was implemented they could return to their regular duties.

This expectation is no longer realistic because change has become so pervasive. Unfortunately, many libraries have failed to adjust to this new environment with the result that staff stress and frustration are greater than they need to be. So long as staff are expected to perform regular duties in addition to implementing new activities, staff will be stressed and many eventually will begin to feel they are on a perpetual treadmill.

Most people recognize the reality that the traditional Lewin change model no longer accurately describes organizational change. Change has become undeniably continuous. There never seems to be let up. We need new models and new strategies for organizing and describing work assignments.

A change model I’ve found very helpful in explaining the conditions that must be present in order for change to occur is based on the work of Richard Beckhard and Reuben Harris. They present a change model that can be expressed in terms of a simple equation: D X V X F = R. The “D” stands for dissatisfaction, the “V” stands for vision, and the “F” stands for first steps. If these three factors working in combination are present, and if the overall impact is great enough to overcome “R”, resistance, change will occur.

I like to restate the equation in slightly different terms; that is C = D X V X F = R. In other words, for change to occur, the D, V, and F are conditions that must be present and greater than R.

Let’s explore the various components of the equation in a little more detail. The “D” stands for dissatisfaction. This means that before change is likely to occur dissatisfaction must exist. People must be feeling “pain.” They must be sufficiently dissatisfied with the current situation that they are willing to endure the “pain” of change. It is the lack of “pain or dissatisfaction” that largely explains why librarians have been slow to embrace the need for change.

It is also important to emphasize that dissatisfaction need not be negative in nature. A visionary leader might be dissatisfied with the current situation and wish to see change occur. Of course, the principal challenge to such leaders is that they must build a base of support for their vision. In university settings this has proved to be a daunting challenge because visions are so rarely shared visions.

Ideally it would be great if change were always triggered by inspiring visions, but researchers tell us that in most organizational situations, change doesn’t derive from inspiration, it derives from organizational pain. For example, the Ford Motor Company didn’t initiate its change program. Quality is No. 1, its U.S. car division was hemorrhaging $1 million per day. IBM was also slow to react to the changing technological marketplace. They delayed action until it was almost too late. Even then IBM was forced to jettison its corporate culture of no layoffs as thousands of IBMers were forced into early retirement or given lay off notices. I wouldn’t be surprised if universities delayed action until they were faced with the unavoidable need to institute program cutbacks and layoff tenured faculty.

The Vision component (V) of the equation states that every organization needs a vision. It needs to know where it is headed.

The Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland pointed out that: “If you don’t know where you are headed, any road will get you there.” An organization without a vision is likely to be an organization that has lost its way.

It is also important to remember that organizational visions are not static; they need to be revisited periodically as conditions change. Librarians tell me they don’t need to engage in a visioning process because they created a vision statement last year, really don’t understand the difference between mission and vision statements. Unlike mission statements, which are customarily stable, visions need to be dynamic and periodically revisited as conditions change.

The First Steps (F) refers to the need to create action plans that will lead to concrete milestones of progress. Too often librarians have created wonderful visions of what professionals will be able to do in the future. In fact, a few years ago, visioning became almost a fad. Many organizations were quick to create exciting visions, but slow to implement them. As a result visioning as a process was discredited in the minds of many librarians. Such organizations failed to remember that they only need a vision and an action plan, but also the will to act.

When all of the above conditions are present in an organization, the momentum capable of overcoming (R) resistance is possible and thus change becomes much more likely to occur. I do have some philosophical problems with the (R) component of the formula. Since resistance to change is inevitable and since resistance is often a healthy and desirable reaction, I recommend not thinking about “overcoming” resistance, but learning how to “manage” resistance in a change process.

Change Strategies

There are a number of common approaches to introducing organizational change. These include top-down, bottom-up, cross-section and pilot projects.

Top-down describes a situation where an organization’s leadership team decides what changes will be made. Communication with staff occurs through large group briefings, written notices, and memoranda. When this approach is used, research-

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ers tell us that many staff will not really understand why the changes are necessary. They also do not feel any sense of ownership. But as mentioned previously, the top-down approach is still the most prevalent change strategy employed by libraries, particularly when it is augmented by staff implementation teams.

Bottom-up strategies usually involve a team approach. This strategy gained popularity during the empowerment movement of the 1980s. This approach can be effective but too often the various teams begin to work independently, focusing on the issues that are most pressing from their individual group perspectives. The larger view of organizational change gets lost in the process. It is also the case that progress is likely to vary from group to group, so that the overall organizational objectives are not achieved as some of the small groups succeed whereas others falter.

Cross-section strategies usually involve recruiting a representative group of staff from a cross-section of the organization. The representatives are formed into group(s) variously known as task forces, working groups or something similar. The task forces are able to gain a broad under-

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Profiles Encouraged

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Origins: I was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, but spent most of my childhood in the Knoxville/Chattanooga area. My family has deep ties to the South, especially to the Raleigh, North Carolina, area. (We claim kinship with Colonel Joel Lane, who donated the land that Raleigh was built on.)

Life experiences: I have now spent more time in the South than in the North. As a child, I came to just a distant relative in the South, and I graduated from Catawba College, located in Salisbury, North Carolina, with a B.A. in Anthropology. I then moved on to graduate Anthropology. My emphasis was in Physical Anthropology and even now, I believe I could identify human skeletal material. I even took Forensic Anthropology from Dr. Bikhis, who was fictionalized in Patricia Cornwell's book The Body Farm. I moved to Tallahassee, Florida, and started working on my Master's at Florida State University. I was actually enrolled in two different graduate programs in two states for awhile, as I was writing my thesis for anthropology while working as a paraprofessional at FSU's Law Library and attending FSU.

First encounter with libraries: My mother told me before I went off to college that I should become a librarian, but that was just not a cool thing to be in the early 1970's, so as far as I was concerned. Imagine my chagrin when I found myself working as a library page in a branch of the Knoxville/County Public Library system in the early 70's. My mother was right after all!!! I'd gotten tired of washing human skeletal material in cold water in the winter and doing fieldwork in the hot summer to make ends meet. (I was on some of the last archaeological projects done by UT before the Tellico Dam project was expropriated by the Environmental Protection Act by Congress. Does anyone else remember the "Save the Smokey Darter" campaign?) Before leaving Knoxville, I had moved up to an LTA position in the Catalog Department of the public library. I got a job in FSU's main library in the Serials Department. As a state employee I could take two courses per semester for free as long as it was work-related. After paying all those Anthropology out-of-state graduate tuition fees at UT, it was a welcome change. I ended up as the LTA in FSU's Law Library Catalog Department.

Current position: After receiving my MLS, I accepted a position as Assistant Cataloger at the College of Charleston's Library. I've been there ever since, though I am now Head of the Department. I have spent many a year with Katina and boys, do I have some great Katina stories!! I like being in a place that allows me to be a jack-of-all-trades, as we catalog all kinds of materials and all kinds of formats for the main library, our Special Collections, the Marine Resources Library associated with the College, and the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture. I even got some time in at the Reference Desk during the busiest part of each semester.

Kids: I was a late bloomer in the marriage and children department. But I obviously learned quickly. My husband and I have three children: Moshe is in the 2nd grade and Malika and Simcha are in the 1st grade at Addelstone Hebrew Academy. I am now being forced to learn cursive Hebrew, so who knows, perhaps I will get around to cataloging those Hebrew books the library has from a recent gift collection. With schoolwork from a dual curriculum and all their extracurricular activities, I sometimes come to work just to get away from it all.


Favorite pastimes: Reading, mostly mysteries, needlepoint, swimming in the summer and going to the beach with the kids, and participating in all the Jewish holidays with family and friends.

Toughest years at work: 1990-91. I became Head of the Catalog Department, lost two of three LTA's, hired and trained two more plus an Assistant Cataloger, trained a temporary Cataloger for the Avery Research Institute, taught two Anthropology courses on the side, adopted a child, became pregnant and gave birth to twins, finished cataloging a major microfilm set for OCLC, and after all this, came back to work!! Lack of sleep is definitely the worst method of torture — I would have gladly given up any state secrets known for four hours of uninterrupted sleep!

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...derstanding of the proposed changes, but such understandings are often limited only to the task force members who are actually involved in the change process. Others in the organization, unfortunately, may never be meaningfully involved in the process. They don't understand what are the changes themselves or why they are needed. As a result, ownership of and commitment toward the changes are generally lacking.

Pilot strategies can be used to demonstrate the potential of a change, i.e., pick a group to show others what is possible. The usual approach is to select a particular part of the organization or a particular set of activities that will highlight the change process. These change efforts are usually well-defined and since management has a stake in their success, they generally are well supported. The results of the pilot, assuming that it is successful, will be showcased throughout the organization. Transferring the results of a pilot project, however, to the other parts of an organization often proves difficult. The "not invented here" syndrome gets in the way and some of the so-called "resisters" argue that they could have done it better if only they had been given the chance.

Participatory Strategic Planning

In a real situation it is likely that elements of all of the above strategies will play a role in the change process of complex organizations. The strategy I personally prefer is very participatory in nature. It is often called "whole-system change" or "real-time strategic change" by its developers. It is a change strategy based upon the work of Ron Lippitt and his associates. The process is called "preferred futuring" and is unique in a number of ways.

First, it is a large group intervention technique. While it can be used with small groups, i.e., five or ten people or more, it can also be used with groups as large as several hundred people all working together in one place at the same time.

Second, it is designed to involve the entire staff from the director or CEO to the most junior professional to the clerk in the mailroom.

Third, it is a process that enables staff to be involved in both the planning and implementation phases. The premise is that when staff are expected to implement a change, buy-in is more likely to occur when staff have had an opportunity to shape the change.

Fourth, the process makes it easy to involve stakeholders. Opportunities are made so that planners are able to hear what our "customers" have to say about our services. The process can also enable customers to hear what staff have to say. Such exchanges of views can be extremely important in this era of collaboration.

Fifth, change can occur in a number of different parts of the organization simultaneously.

Sixth, the process helps to change staff perceptions about change itself. Instead of change being viewed as an add-on activity, administrators and staff alike begin to realize that change activities must be viewed as part of regular work assignments.

Whole-system change processes have been used successfully in dozens of organizations: centralized and decentral-
ized corporations, state agencies, and educational organizations including libraries. A whole-system approach to change management is a powerful process that will generate a high level of staff support and commitment, but it is not an organizational panacea.

To be candid, many, if not most, change efforts fall short of anticipated goals. John Kotter identifies reasons why transformational programs of change can fail. Among those he cites are: 1) failure to create a sense of urgency for change; 2) lack of a clear vision; 3) not removing the obstacles to change; 4) failure to anchor changes into the organization's culture; and 5) a failure to follow-through with plans.11

In my experience, most failures can be traced to a failure of management to follow through with their commitments to implement plans. What happens is that management allows itself to become distracted by day-to-day pressures, and as a consequence it loses sight of the vision. Staff soon lose heart and before long they have fallen back into old habits and nothing happens. Unfortunately, when this occurs, staff cynicism toward change and their role in making change happen only increases. Motivating staff to change will be much harder the next time around. My advice to librarians is never engage in a whole-system type change process unless there is a strong commitment to following through.

Last Words

Change strategies that seek to involve staff at all levels demand skilled leadership because so much is going on at the same time, i.e., multiple initiatives involving staff at all levels. Moreover, while participatory change strategies maximize the likelihood that staff will buy-in to changes, there are no guarantees. In fact, some staff will continue to resist. Resistors much be handled in a decisive yet humane way. Some will leave voluntarily; others, who may have to be reassigned or offered early retirement, and there may be one or two who may have to be asked to depart involuntarily. Managing such actions in a way that doesn’t detract from the objectives of the change project requires careful planning, open communications, and sensitivity toward staff feelings. Little wonder why skillful leadership is so important.

When I entered the profession the priority concerns were building collections and new facilities. Our organizations were fairly stable. Even the age of automation with its new systems and procedures didn’t immediately lead to significant changes in organizational structures. It wasn’t until integrated systems, OPACs and networks became the principal tools for doing business that we began to see significant change occur in the way libraries were organized and services delivered.

We now frequently read about flattening of organizations, blurring of lines between technical and public services, reengineering of reference, and outsourcing of functions. In those early years, leadership was often equated with those who built the largest collections and grandest buildings or implemented the most extensive automated systems. Today leadership is often equated with technology. What about tomorrow? What will define success? What behaviors will differentiate leaders from managers? I believe that those who are most successful at leading their organizations through the "permanent white-water" that lies ahead will be the ones most likely to earn the mantle, leader.
Endnotes

2The term derives from the work of Thomas J. Kuhn who wrote about the nature of scientific advancements.
7Some organizations are required to produce a strategic planning document: they are not given a choice. In such instances the document serves as a political instrument which in itself is an important purpose. My advice, when this occurs, is to separate the planning document from the change process itself. This can be done by identifying and prioritizing a set of what I term "strategic initiatives" that move the library in the direction it wishes to head.
10This change strategy is reported on in great detail by Robert W. Jacobs in his Real Time Strategic Change, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1994. The process Real Time Change Strategy was developed by the Dannemiller Tyson consulting group in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Rumors

The cheery and ebullient Miriam Gilbert (Westview Press) <Miriam.Gilbert@harpercollins.com> attended Charleston this year since Cathleen Tetro, Westview's promotion manager who attended last year, just gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Come back, Miriam, with Cathleen and congratulations, Cathleen! I sure wish I could go back to my child-bearing days!

And speaking of child-bearing, did I tell you about Stuart Grinell (Ambassador Book Service) and his gorgeous wife Colleen Kelley's new baby? Her name is Savannah. Congrats all around!!

According to the Chronicle of Higher Education (November 21, 1997), William H. Graves has left the UNC-CH to form the Learning Technology Research Institute in the Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. Graves says that the use of technology in the classroom needs to be enhanced by businesses getting involved.

That gallivantin' Tom Leonardt (Oregon Institute of Technology) <leonhart@oit.edu> recently played trumpet for the Klamath Symphony concert.