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GETTING TO GO: STRATEGIC USE OF EXTERNAL EXPERTISE IN LEVERAGING CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

When is it of strategic value to hire the services of an external consultant? What factors must be considered? What happens when the consultant leaves?

In the spring of 2009 the University Librarian at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada hired R2 Consulting (1) to work with librarians and library staff on restructuring our workflow processes from the selection of content to accessing it. This paper examines the “Consultancy Cycle”, so named by Nussbaumer, Mathenia and Merkley. Identified during the course of her experience the “consultancy cycle” has four parts: preparation, participation, implementation and leveraging change. This paper is presented in three sections. Alison Nussbaumer provides the introduction and information on how to select, work with and what to expect from a consultant. Wendy Merkley provides an overview of the implementation process undertaken in response to the consultant’s report, including specific recommendations and Brenda Mathenia provides an overview of how the organization has been able to leverage the work of a consultant into continuous change, in line with long term strategic goals.

Every organization has its unique set of practices and policies that will guide when, how and if external consultants may be hired. This paper assumes the ability to hire a consultant who is external to the organization. Within this paper the term “consultant” refers to an external consultant with whom you have a contract for service.

PREPARATION

While academic libraries around the world share much in common every organization is unique. It is your ability to reflect on your uniqueness, and understand your internal and external environment, that will help you prepare for engaging an external consultant. Careful preparation, as in most projects, is the first step in the process. There are key questions that you need to reflect on, discuss and answer as you move forward. What is the purpose of your change initiative? Are there any advantages or disadvantages to having a consultant on site at different times of the year? What are the risks? Is using an external consultant the best way to proceed for your particular needs and/or situation? How do you ultimately find and select the appropriate consultant?

Prior to engaging an external consultant you need to be able to clearly articulate what your purpose is. You will need to be able to clearly answer the question, “What do I want to achieve?” You need to think about why it is necessary to hire an external consultant to achieve your goals and why now is the right time. Initially your thoughts will likely be unformed and your ideas unclear. Work towards clarity in whatever way you need to. Discuss, brainstorm, contact your network, read, and attend relevant conference sessions until you have a clear statement of purpose. You will be communicating your purpose at every stage in your change process, from hiring the consultant to long after the report is submitted and you are implementing the

consultant's recommendations. Your message will need to be tailored to fit a variety of audiences including funders, staff, the consultant, senior administration and others.

Each project/change initiative will vary in scope and degree. The common element among all is the importance of the change to achieving your library, and institution's, strategic goals. In my organization holistic and systemic change was identified as necessary. My purpose then was to initiate a strategic change and leverage the results to create systemic operational, organizational and cultural change.

Timing may or may not be an important factor. You may not have a choice about timing due to the availability of the consultant and/or key stakeholders. When flexibility is available consider the strategic value of working with a consultant during a specific timeframe. Is there a secondary initiative that you want to link to or leverage with? Are there benefits to selecting a specific semester, month or season? For us timing was a key factor, the need to reinforce a sense of urgency. This resulted in investigating a consultant in November 2008, signing a contract shortly thereafter, and having the work begin in March 2009 with the report submitted and presented to the organization in May 2009.

It is also important to identify potential risks of this type of endeavour. Part of your due diligence in planning is to minimize institutional and contractual risk. What is perhaps less clear is the need to mitigate the risks experienced by your staff. Previous experience and perception inform our response to risk. It is incumbent on the library leadership to create, as much as possible, conditions that reduce personal risk (fear) and increase confidence in the process of working with a consultant. Common negative perceptions include: "that it won't work because we tried it before"; "we do these things and then nothing happens"; the consultant's report gets "deep-sixed". Risk tends to manifest at the individual level – fear of not knowing the answer; fear of the results; fear of saying too much or too little. The combined result of negative perceptions and personal risk can create an awkward or hostile environment for a consultant to work in and needs to be carefully considered and dealt with up front.

There are a myriad of consultants with a significant variety of specializations. Your purpose will set your direction. I recommend starting with your network – do you know someone who has done something similar? Has anyone hired a consultant to work in their library? Phone people, have conversations and ask questions. Once you have a few possibilities make initial contact with the consultant and ask them to talk about their experience as it relates to your goals. If you are getting close to making a decision ask for references and speak to others who have hired them.

In my own experience, I was able to attend a preconference led by the consultants that I eventually hired. I talked to them and talked to other conference delegates who had worked with them previously. This led to a series of phone calls where they were incredibly helpful in assisting me to clarify and clearly articulate my purpose. You will be working closely with your consultant, make sure that you are comfortable with not only their deliverables, but their approach, style and ability to connect with you.

PARTICIPATION IN . . .

1. Prior to the consultant's arrival

Once you have signed a contract with a consultant the project-specific work begins. Depending upon the work that you have contracted for, your consultant will need to do some of their own

pre-work which often, requires you to send them information about your organization and needs.

In order to be prepared prior to coming onsite, our consultants requested a significant amount of information that resided in a variety of library departments. This required requesting the information, obtaining it, providing appropriate context and explanation, collating it, and sending it to the consultant in a timely fashion. We provided a range of information from the university's strategic plan, our guiding questions and organizational information to data related to local cataloguing and acquisition efforts.

At this stage it is very important to begin communicating in general with all library employees and specifically with those who will be working directly with the consultant. This aspect of participation is important to managing expectations, addressing concerns, minimizing fears and articulating your commitment to using the recommendations provided by the consultant.

Managing expectations is important. People need to know what is and is not expected of them during all stages in the process. Levels of participation will likely be different for different stakeholders. Some people may only be engaged in the early stages, such as providing information to the consultants. Some people may be part of working with the consultant on site. Some may be interviewed one-on-one, others as part of a larger group. It is important that individuals know what their level of participation is, and why.

Understanding change and transition concepts, processes and behaviours can help address staff concerns and minimize individual fears. In my organization, staff feedback indicated previous participation in workshops about change and transition, so I decided to forgo this process. That was a mistake as I discovered later on. The previous training and development was insufficient to equip staff to deal with the stresses of a very focused, systemic planned change.

It is important that the library leadership clearly and continuously articulate their expectations regarding the implementation of the recommendations. Failure to do this at the outset can lead to dissatisfaction towards the consultant's recommendations and unwillingness to follow-through. The report that we received from the consultants contained 62 recommendations – ranging from the simple to the complex. The recommendations formed a series of building blocks and latter steps assumed that previous ones had been implemented. The lack of shared understanding between library staff and library leadership about committing to all of the recommendations caused unnecessary tension in the process.

2. Consultants on site

A high degree of planning and scheduling was necessary to ensure inclusiveness while managing the costs for the onsite portion of the contract. Our consultants were on site for three days of meetings and interviews. The consultants required booked space appropriate for individual and group interviews. They needed a workroom dedicated to their use where they could compile their interview results and make plans and adjustments for the next day. Our consultants did a tremendous amount of work onsite; you can likely expect the same from yours.

The project leaders must be present and available for the entire onsite process. This is not the time to schedule a holiday or have to attend campus budget meetings. The process, while

highly planned, is also very fluid. Changes are nearly inevitable and the consultants will need clarification, interpretation and the ability to make adjustments throughout the visit.

3. After the consultant leaves

Once the consultant leaves the work is not yet done. The consultant will be pulling together all of the data they have gathered, analyzing it, creating a report and making recommendations. Depending upon their previous, individual and collective, experience with consultants the staff will have varying thoughts and reflections about what they just experienced and about what the future may hold. Two things are important for the leadership at this time: 1) manage your staff's expectations and 2) continue to reiterate your purpose and commitment to the process. This is a time for potential conflict as some of the staff members are excited about the process for change and others fearful. Providing a debrief for staff after the site visit and ensuring ongoing conversations while waiting for the report can help to address these differences.

4. Report and recommendations

I don't believe it is possible to over-communicate your commitment to implementing the recommendations that arise from the report. Be clear about your own expectations regarding the recommendations. Are you committing to them all? Are you opening them up for discussion and selecting some and rejecting others? If so, who will be a part of that discussion?

You need to carefully consider how you plan to distribute the report. Who receives it? How do you launch it? What discussions will be held and when? I invited the consultants to come back on site to present the final report as part of a one day staff retreat. The report was disseminated electronically on the Friday prior to the Monday retreat. The rationale for this was to allow those who wished to read it sufficient time to do so prior to the retreat while minimizing the time available for any anxiety, stress or hardening of opinion to occur. The consultants presented the report and answered all of the questions and challenges put before them. The recommendations in the report became our blue-print for moving forward.

IMPLEMENTATION – DECONSTRUCTION/RECONSTRUCTION

Focus: Analysis of workflows – from selection to access

Goal: To increase workflow efficiencies in order to:

- Increase capacity to manage & integrate electronic resources
- Align staff efforts with patron demand
- Advance progress on high-priority projects

The R2 Report "Workflow Analysis: Selection-to-Access" provided a blueprint for change and led the Library Administrative team to undertake a series of initiatives constructed to move staff into what might best be described as a learning environment. This learning environment was designed to challenge staff to step outside of their traditional roles and routines while at the same time providing them with the training, support and encouragement to allow them to gain confidence in their ability to be successful in this changing environment. One way in which this learning environment was fostered was through the creation of new working groups that crossed existing departmental boundaries. For example, staff working in Technical Services and staff working in Information Systems had largely done their jobs with little more than a passing, and sometimes grudging, acknowledgement of the clear overlap in their work, especially as it related to electronic resources and the library's integrated library system. This staff division had been a mirror image of the operational division, with responsibility for Technical Services and for

Information Systems held by two individuals whose interests were often competing. With responsibility for both departments now falling under the umbrella of the new AUL-ISTS, and the previous supervisors removed entirely from the equation, building teams based on achieving the recommendations articulated in the R2 report became possible.

THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The R2 report made very specific recommendations related to technical service and information systems processes along with general observations and suggestions on a variety of issues facing the library. While the work of implementing all the recommendations presented by R2 is ongoing, the following includes the most focused and direct improvements available to the organization.

1. One: Streamline Acquisitions & Cataloguing Processes

- Implement electronic selection
- Implement electronic ordering, receiving, invoicing
- Consolidate monograph ordering with single vendor
- Implement batch copy cataloguing
- Outsource processing

The first recommendation was the building block foundational to achieving the goals outlined in the R2 report. In order to begin to “un-stick” the library, allowing new relationships to form and reorienting efforts to accomplish the other recommendations it was essential for old processes to be discarded. Essentially we were looking for a change in emphasis from a high percentage of time & effort devoted to print resources to a more equitable split between print and electronic. To achieve this required a complete deconstruction and reconstruction of the acquisitions and cataloguing processes. As a starting point a small interdepartmental team was brought together to lead an audit of the library’s integrated library system, with a view to both re-vamping the existing system and laying the ground for the implementation of several new modules including a new discovery platform. The individuals chosen to be part of this team had several qualities in common, they were well-regarded by their fellow staff, had a shared knowledge base and were not completely averse to change. As no one on staff, including those charged with the responsibility of administering the integrated library system, had ever had training specific to these responsibilities the first step was to invest in high-level skill development. Significant dollars were spent sending this core team for training with the outcomes reaching well beyond the obvious goal of having a well-trained staff. Perhaps the most significant outcome of the training was to provide the team with the opportunity to begin to build new relationships based on respect and a sense of shared purpose. Further, these individuals became increasingly supportive of plans for change and were able to share their optimism with their colleagues.

The integrated library system audit process provided an additional opportunity to engage staff in operational change and the success of this initiative is at heart a direct reflection of the substantial gains that were being made in effecting change at the cultural level. As much of the literature on organizational culture points out, changing culture is difficult because so much of the culture of an organization is rooted in the collective history of the organization (Schneider *et al.*, 1996). The ILS audit engaged staff in a practical analysis of their work within that system, but widened into a discussion of the “why of things”, that is, staff began to question whether the work served the library or the users of the library.

2. Integrate & Prioritize Processes for Electronic Resources

- Electronic Resources Committee
- Centralized funding of e-resource purchase

- Implement ERM module
- Mainstream digitization initiatives
- Reduce resources related to print subscriptions

Dollars spent and usage statistics provided compelling evidence that a comparable shift was required in the staff time spent on the management of electronic resources (e.g. In 2008 e-journal title searches outnumbered print journal title searches by a ratio of 13 to 1). Decision-making process was centralized into a team (Collection Work Team) that was charged with responsibility to develop a process for the acquisition of electronic resources and the review of all on-going purchase requests. Innovative Interfaces Electronic Resources Management (III-ERM) module was implemented to allow for better management of resources and integration of these resources into the web interface. Formation of a digitization team – with a primary objective to integrate digitization (both local content and institutional repository (IR)) into the Tech Services workflow has been successful. Additionally the initial steps have been undertaken to develop an ongoing assessment process that will look at reducing both the dollars and time spent on print subscriptions.

3. Reconsider the Resource Discovery Experience

- Defined two new functions – Data Integrity & Discovery Systems
- Implement new discovery platforms

The primary goal with regard to data integrity was to shift from having cataloguing staff spend most of their time constructing and reviewing MARC records to establishing a process for monitoring standards for all forms of metadata. The Technical Services staff have put in place a review process which performs quality control by reviewing samples of imported MARC records and have become involved in the creation of metadata for other collections, including those being built in ContentDM and DSpace. An important aspect of this processes has been to foster relationships where staff from across the organization work together to build library collections. This organization-wide sense of ownership continues to foster cultural renewal.

The library's current websites provide links to a variety of resources, but it has become clear that to offer fully integrated access it is necessary to rethink the discovery experience. Staff have begun working on a new discovery systems with the goal of providing access to an array of modules and information resources via a single discovery platform, rather than as separate systems. As part of the III audit the library is currently moving to introduce a discovery platform that will include: the catalogue, ERM, a federated search tool, a web-linking tool, and access to a variety of digital collections. The new discovery platform will be used to unify the various tools and present them and the results they deliver coherently.

While the consultant's report included many more recommendations than are dealt with in this paper, these three provide examples of how the library was able to make significant progress by making strategic choices. In each case the work done by library staff was changed in significant ways and it has been critical to ensure that staff participates in the process and that they are supported through the change. In this regard, considerable effort has been spent on training and redesigning jobs to support staff as they take on new roles within the library. Much has been accomplished and with each accomplishment staff become more self-confident and engaged further moving the library forward toward full support of the University's Strategic Plan.

LEVERAGING CHANGE

Once the consultants leave, expectations are managed, commitment is confirmed and implementation has begun how can an organization take advantage of current change events to facilitate ongoing change and effect long term, systemic transformation? Can specific changes proposed by a consultant and implemented by specific teams create opportunity for further change and how does an organization take advantage of these types of opportunities? If your organization is ready for it, the work of the consultant can help to establish a legitimacy surrounding certain change efforts that can bolster related and future change activities. The laying of a solid foundation of change based on external evaluation, analysis, data and objectivity can open the doors to a greater change, one that begins to affect not only processes but the culture of the organization.

By employing an outside consultant the technical service and information system changes necessary for our institution to thrive were seen as more “legitimate” rather than being seen as a desire to impose change for “change sake” from a new and “overzealous” new leadership team. The initial successful changes experienced primarily by staff provided a combination of trust and self esteem/value boost that allowed additional changes to begin to happen. We effectively leveraged change in other areas of the organization by achieving success (on many levels) and connecting new activity to the previous success and the long term needs to support the University Strategic Plan.

For many staff – the “workflow” changes originating in technical service areas created what I like to call a “recharge effect”. These focused (process, procedures, technology) changes were critical in moving our organization forward and have begun to lead to other changes. Leveraging new change from existing efforts was possible because the initial changes:

- Opened the minds of many staff to the *possibility of change* – that it could really happen and it wasn’t necessarily bad, scary, or unnecessary.
- The initial activities encouraged “risk taking” on the part of staff in the form of new workflows and at the same time we *ensured success* because we knew (from experience) that the technical services changes we were pursuing could only be successful! This was proven technology and processes that our organization had simply not kept up with.
- With success achieved through new process, training, support and service mentality – self-esteem and confidence is built among the staff and future change becomes easier to initiate (perhaps incrementally easier – but easier)

Processes, vendors and practices were changed. Daily workflow for a majority of employees was impacted and positive overall experiences were had by many. Important for our long term goals is the fact that the same employees who experienced significant change, and success, in the technical services areas of the organization also work on the circulation desk, manage student employees and support reference services. All play a significant role in providing services to our varied user groups. By framing the back of house changes/upgrades as supporting student success, student engagement and the strategic plan (all true) we were planting the seeds that would allow us to grow staff belief in the importance of embracing their roles at the public services desks. Up until this time some saw their work at the service desks as something imposed upon them. In a real sense it had been. As AUL CSAF I was tasked with improving our customer service, enhancing outreach and overall updating the libraries approach to providing services and resource to our many users. Some of the changes needing to happen on the public service side of the house were “fuzzy” and hard to define. It can be

difficult to define “Find ways to say yes to students”, or give enough examples on what it means to “provide help” or to help staff understand that each situation is unique and that it is okay to treat students different from one another if appropriate. This is particularly difficult when trying to move a group of very experienced staff from a rule bound, black and white approach to work, to a fluid, flexible and customer oriented approach to their daily tasks.

Many of the public service staff were ready for these changes and a few less so. The key to making these changes successful, and maintaining ongoing progress, has been the absolute success of the more concrete back of house changes that were taking place at the same time as well as in providing a safe environment for staff to explore and learn in. Staff hears the consistent message that customers are important, we are here to help them and any efforts made on behalf of users is never wrong or inappropriate. Mistakes are tolerated and expected and addressed with respect and clarity. The implementation of the process oriented changes in technical services areas, which impacted all public service staff, provided concrete proof for all staff that change is indeed happening in the organization. More importantly than the message that change is happening is that they are involved in making change happen and are experiencing success in various ways.

WE ARE NOT DONE YET . . .

As in many cases, change is often explored, and even talked about, and as often as not, significant change never happens. The actions of library administration to move the library into the 21st century in the areas of technical services and customer service are making a very real statement to staff. Change can (will) happen and it can be a good experience.

We are beginning to hear of positive experiences with our public services staff – they are buying into the belief that they have the skills and ability (along with my trust and support) to make reasonable accommodations for users of library material and space. They no longer feel the need to ask me to okay “everything” but they still have that option for those remaining times of uncertainty. For example circulation staff are taking ownership of decisions geared at “adding value” to our users experience and are indeed finding ways to “say yes” to our students and a more general openness to new procedures (distance delivery of BI’s to our smaller campuses as a pilot and interest in expanding our “outreach” from the newly formed Student Engagement Team) all speak to a new attitude toward what we do as a library and to change in general.

Have we succeeded in making systemic, transformational change happen? No. Will we? I certainly hope but it will take time. I expect a minimum of seven years before true systemic change can be realized and even then it will likely not be complete. Change is constant. As you might expect, and have probably experienced for yourselves, the changes that have taken place so far, and even the idea of change, combined with our particular organizational culture (and most organizations to one degree or another) resulted in responses from our staff ranging from:

- Fierce resistance
- Fear & loathing
- Acceptance & compliance
- Excitement & enthusiastic embracement (of the idea of change)

While a detailed exploration of change management is beyond the scope of this paper, to help others hoping to effect successful change I would like to mention a process called “managing transition” and in particular a feature of this process known as the Neutral Zone (Bridges). It is important for change managers and leaders to be fully aware of this concept as “the neutral

zone” is part of the transition phase that people go through when organizational change is afoot. As Bridges states “it isn’t the changes that do you in, it’s the transition” (Bridges, p 3)

According to William Bridges, author of Managing Transitions, (3rd edition) “*change* is situational: the move to a new site, the retirement of the founder. . . Transition, on the other hand, is psychological; it is a three-phase process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about.” (Bridges, p 3)

“Managing transition involvesthe simple process of helping people through three phases:

- 1. Letting go of the old ways and the old identity people had. This first phase of transition is an ending, and the time when you need to help people to deal with their losses.*
- 2. Going through an in-between time when the old is gone but the new isn’t fully operational. We call this time the “neutral zone”; it’s when the critical psychological realignment and repatternings take place.*
- 3. Coming out of the transition and making a new beginning. This is when people develop the new identity, experience the new energy, and discover the new sense of purpose that make the change begin to work.*

Because transition is a process by which people unplug from an old world and plug into a new world, we can say that transition starts with an ending and finishes with a beginning.” (Bridges 2009, p 4-5)

Many, if not most, of our staff are currently securely ensconced in Bridges neutral zone. Some are lost, some are finding their way slowly and some are making more rapid advancement through this critical stage. All have, or will, encounter the unknown of the neutral zone - a critical step if we hope for change to take hold. If we cannot get all our staff out of the neutral zone at some point we may see failure – at least at an individual level. If too many staff fail to make successful transitions our entire change efforts could fail. The transition is key and providing ongoing support, consistent messaging and offering new ways of doing and thinking can facilitate the successful movement of employees through the unsettling realities of the “neutral zone”.

In our discussion of leveraging on-going change, the neutral zone is one of our best opportunities for continued change and creating the successful future direction for our organization. While we might want to move people (or believe they have moved) through this phase quickly, we cannot eliminate this phase and if we are not careful we can dismiss this phase and sabotage our chances for long term change to take root. Because our organization is currently quite deep within the neutral zone – we are able to continue making changes – when individuals have lost their way (so to speak) it is a time to begin planting seeds of the future. Providing guidance such as “We can no longer do x but we can do y”, or “we no longer need you to put labels on books (we get them sent shelf ready now) we need your skills to ensuring all links to electronic resources remain up to date to support student success”. The time spent in the neutral zone is a time of upheaval, unhappiness, anger, fear, loathing and general disarray for many individuals. We are definitely experiencing all these emotions (and more) in our shop, however, we can leverage the fear, loss, and uncertainty to help our staff and librarians through the neutral zone to a new beginning by staying on point and offering “the new” and “the necessary” as the way out. For some this happens relatively quickly, for others it will be a much longer and more stressful process.

PERSISTENCE AND MESSAGING

One of the keys to our process has been to maintain common language and the same message from the start. Key to our efforts are the following concepts:

- Moving forward
- Building it today
- Getting to yes
- Student engagement
- Supporting the University Strategic Plan

Persistence and clarity of message are important for leveraging change. Initial successes offered by the consultants, combined with use of common vocabulary, new words, words consistent with what you want to be – allows an organization to build the language and the reality of the future. Those outside the organization begin to hear what you are doing (using your new language) and become interested, and that can in turn leverage additional change as momentum is gained and pressures from outside sources begin to be felt. Good pressures, pressure of expectation and excitement are what we are looking for from our users. We are beginning to experience some of those energies.

We have consistently used the language we want to all staff to adopt and that describes our anticipated future.

- ✓ *We reframe* all our activities, jobs, and attitudes to engaging and serving our users. If our activities are not adding value to our users we need to refocus our activities. Constantly asking questions such as “How does this serve the University Strategic Plan?” - keeps our efforts focused and on target. We have reframed all our work to the library strategic plan which is *the University Strategic Plan*.
- ✓ *Encourage risk taking* – we pilot new initiatives and if we meet with less than stellar results we learn from it and carry on or try again. Support for individual and group efforts to try new things, to stretch our current models and to meet new or unexpected needs is supported at all times.
- ✓ *Ensure success* – we find ways to do new things that we know will be successful but we just haven’t done (like we did in tech services) and we strive to celebrate our successes as much and as often as we can.

While we have much more to do to implement recommended changes and to leverage recent changes and future changes to achieving our end goal, we know that it will take time and consistent effort to make it happen. The use of a consultant combined with a clear goal, persistent messages and consistent actions may serve you well as each of you strive to leverage change in your organization.

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