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## Issues in Vendor-Library Relations-The Lessons of Hawaii

Barry Fast  
*Academic Book Center*

Judy Webster  
*University of Tennessee*

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# Issues in Vendor-Library Relations

## The Lessons of Hawaii

Column Editors: **Judy Webster** (U. of Tennessee) <jdwebster@utk.edu>  
and **Barry Fast** (Academic Book Center) <acbcbarry@attmail.com>

by **Barry Fast**  
<acbcbarry@attmail.com>

The B&T/Hawaii outsourcing controversy reminds me of my friends who are getting divorced. The soon to be ex-husband and I went for a walk in the woods a few weeks ago. It was painful. He told me of all the years of disappointment, the lack of emotional support from his wife, her self involvement and bad habits. I've always liked him so I felt badly about all. He had missed in his marriage. A few weeks later, I had lunch with the soon-to-be ex-wife. She told me of all her years of disappointment, the lack of emotional support from her husband, his single-minded devotion to his work over his family. I like her too, and the lunch was so sad I didn't feel like eating (and when I don't want to eat it is serious indeed).

Two decent people with two separate, but equally sad, stories. It's happened to many of us, but for outside observers like me, the reality of their lives is known only to them. I certainly can't judge by listening to them describe the elements of their breakup because the descriptions from each of them are completely believable and totally at odds with each other's. They are both true.

Reading accounts of the B&T/Hawaii outsourcing controversy has a similar effect on me. Without knowing all the facts, all the people involved, and the history in detail, I am uncomfortable passing judgment, certainly at this stage and at this distance. The suffering is real, though, and one can't help but feel genuine empathy for the librarians who have been demeaned, whether intentionally or through insensitivity, for the people at B&T who have found themselves consumed by this controversy, and even for the people who drove this process. How many of us, with the best of intentions, have tried to solve a problem only to find that our solutions were dumb, or even worse, caused other people pain. And not just in our professional lives. If we are smart though, over time we learn from our own mistakes and from watching others, and we make these bad decisions less frequently.

What can we learn from the Hawaii experience? Here are few observations that seem apparent, at least in hindsight:

- You can't force change: It is easy for managers, especially in traditionally hierarchical organizations, to believe that change can be instituted from the top down.

Maybe for a little while, and maybe for a partial change, it can, but often it's an illusion. If you want to change the way an organization operates, you have to start at the bottom of the hierarchical management and supervisory structure, and work your way up. There must be a buy-in process all along the chain. It takes time and patience and is hallmarked by respect for peoples' positions in the hierarchy and their viewpoints. If not, people justifiably feel threatened, frightened, or angry. If your change solution is the right one, most people will understand it and buy into it if you make them feel, genuinely, part of the process.

- There are rarely simple solutions: The simpler the solution to a problem looks, the more dangerous it is. If you awake in the middle of the night with the solution plainly in front of you, you forgot something, maybe a lot. There are elegant solutions, but no simple solutions. Any solution involving people and their work (read that as sense of worth) is by definition complex and will take time to implement. Don't be seduced by your own brilliance. That's just your ego.

- Private industry can do anything better and more efficiently than public organizations or government: Private industry can do some things better than government or public organizations, but there is plenty that government can and does do better. (This is why I dislike Rush Limbaugh, the master of simple sounding solutions, sorry if you're offended). Take libraries as just one example. Libraries are better because they are public, because they are the embodiment of public service. There are some things that can be done more effectively or efficiently within libraries by private companies, but the institutions themselves are a great example of government run, high performance, best bang for the buck organizations. Same for cops and firefighters. And the thought of a privately-run military is chilling. That doesn't mean that some infrastructure functions can't be better performed within the military by private companies, but the management, ethos and intellectual underpinnings are best when run by the government, our democratic government. And I worry about the privatization of hospitals and the profit motive in treating sick and poor people. There is a balance between private and public institutions in the operation of our society, but there is no obvious simple answer.

- The customer is not always right: As vendors our customers are buying not only our books but our expertise. This means we sometimes know things they don't know. In our rush to please, "to be of service," we can accidentally cause of host of problems. If we are working with our customer on a complex project we have to know when and how to say "no" or "wait a minute, let's really examine this." If we don't use our expertise and experience, we are short-changing the customer.

- Know who the customer is: Sometimes our apparent customer is a surrogate for a larger organization. An acquisitions librarian may be our apparent customer, but the real customer is the library and the public it serves. It is the vendor's responsibility to work with the acquisitions librarian for the benefit of the real customer, the library and its community. Sometimes the apparent and real customer are in sync, and sometimes not. We have to know the difference.

- Respect differences and listen: It is easy to confuse objections with obstruction. People communicate in different styles, and some don't do it very well. But what they have to say may be important. As we work together on complicated projects, recognize that some objections, even if not well-stated, have validity. Our cultural and gender differences have the potential to interfere with communication. They also have the potential to bring different experiences and viewpoints together, creating an environment where the project benefits because of those differences. For a project to be successful mutual respect has to be institutionalized. This is not just a feel good factor; it is the essence of teamwork. 🐾

