Developing a "beta mindset": Building a Change-Ready Workforce and Culture

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Abstract

In an era of rapidly evolving technology, changing government policy and increased client expectations – and despite predictions of their demise - university libraries have continued to adapt and even thrive. Building on the changes that resulted from a major restructure at La Trobe University in 2014, La Trobe University Library is focusing on developing and sustaining an agile workforce that is able to respond quickly and innovatively to emerging trends and changing client needs. To continue to remain relevant to our institution, we recognise that we will need to be agile and responsive to change and to leverage the skills and expertise of library staff in new ways. We are promoting the adoption of a ‘beta mindset’, acknowledging that we will need to constantly evolve. While we will ensure that our services are of a high quality, we will not aim for perfection but instead will refine our services over time as we gain insights and new ideas for improvements and further development. We are fostering a culture that views change and adaptation as an ongoing opportunity and accepts a level of risk, with the possibility of failure, acknowledging that the learning that takes place is as important as the outcome. Using a ‘stop/start/continue’ methodology, services and processes are regularly reviewed to ensure they are relevant and meet client needs. Library staff are encouraged to look beyond the Library's traditional services to identify new opportunities and experiment with new collaborations which enable the library to take a leadership role across the university. This paper will explore the challenges of changing the library's culture, embedding a ‘beta mindset’ in the organization and identifying indicators of success for this cultural change.

Keywords: Organizational change; workforce planning; culture; strategic planning

Introduction

Over the last thirty years, academic libraries have undergone constant change as they have adapted to a shifting environment. Herring [2014, p.1] asserts that ‘the changes that have occurred in librarianship over the last decade and a half are more than all the combined changes that have occurred since Dewey.’ In some cases, this change has been incremental; in others, it has had a transformational effect on libraries. Selingo [2014] describes this current period as an evolutionary moment for higher education, in which academic libraries cannot afford to be complacent but must be aware of the changes occurring around them and be ready to engage actively in that change. The need for change in university libraries, driven by emerging trends in services and new approaches to learning, teaching and research, is widely acknowledged [Johnson et al. 2015]. The requirement for academic librarians to develop new skills to respond to this changing environment has also been well documented. Auckland [2012] has identified a range of new skills required for librarians to support changing research needs, while Lippincott has documented the move to working in partnership with academics in advisory roles to support pedagogical and curricular change [Lippincott et al., 2014]. Dempsey [2015, p.3] notes that new roles mean ‘[academic libraries] have to unlearn some of what is natural to them’ to remain relevant, by changing services and work processes and developing new partnerships. Libraries need to be aware of the changes occurring around them so that they can continue to evolve and constantly reinvent themselves in response to their changing environment or, as Bell [2015, p. 4] warns, ‘the comfort of complacency will leave us on the outside looking in as opposed to being active participants in the change process’.

Not only must academic libraries and library staff change to respond to, and indeed anticipate, an evolving landscape: the expectation is that we will respond quickly and effectively in ways which provide value to the university. Increasingly, we need to be flexible, able to adopt and adapt to new ways of working which deliver a tangible (and measurable) value.
Change at La Trobe University

In 2014, in a time of changing and uncertain government policy, La Trobe University instigated a large-scale change. This change involved the entire institution in a major restructure over a period of twelve months, resulting in new structures for both academic and support staff. The drivers of this change were alignment of the organizational structure with the future vision of the university and the release of funds to enable increased investment in new initiatives to improve learning, teaching and research in the university. The scale of the restructure presented challenges but also provided an opportunity to make bold changes and align the library more closely with teaching and research, as well as review existing services and build new partnerships. The aim was to achieve what Mossop [2013] describes as transformational change - organizational, operational and cultural change - to reinvigorate the library, introduce new and collaborative services and enable staff to take on new roles.

Through this organizational change process, a preferred operating model was identified and translated into a new library staffing structure which would align the library more closely with the university’s priorities and better leverage the skills and expertise of library staff. The new structure was implemented in December 2014. A substantial program of staff development and team building followed the restructure to provide role clarity, develop staff capabilities and ensure that staff have the skills required to work in their new teams and deliver new services. Communication skills are particularly important as staff now work in cross-campus teams that span all five La Trobe University campuses across the state of Victoria. The robust processes which supported library staff through the change provided us with tools to implement the formal aspects of the change, however structural change by itself was not sufficient to achieve the transformational change required. Cultural change is critical to support a fresh strategic direction and to address the existing beliefs, attitudes and assumptions that influence perceptions during and after change. We view our organizational change as an iceberg (Figure 1): while there are overt factors which need to be addressed, the real challenges lie below the surface. To effectively transition to a new way of working we need to make the informal aspects visible and transparent.

Moving forward: reviewing, refreshing, setting new goals

Six months after the implementation of the new structure, a formal review was undertaken to assess the success of the change and determine whether the original goals were achieved. The focus of the review was to identify areas where the new structure was not working as envisioned or where there were ‘pain points’ for staff in their working environment. Evidence of the effectiveness of the restructure and the impact on staff was gathered through anonymous feedback and focus groups. The review revealed that the greatest issues were related to role and team clarity, learning new skills, sharing knowledge, working in cross-campus teams and workload management. The review also revealed positive elements of the change: it was acknowledged that the structure was aligned with and supported key university strategies, helped to improve our service provision, and had energised staff by encouraging innovation and enabling them to work with new people. The outcomes of the review were shared with library staff and an
action plan developed to implement improvements in response to the identified risks and issues. Progress on this action plan is regularly reported to staff as we implement the agreed improvements throughout this year.

While the organizational change process provided an opportunity to align the library’s structure and services with the university’s strategy, the library itself did not have a strategy or roadmap to clearly articulate priorities and outline the direction for the coming years to both library staff and stakeholders. To develop our strategy, we firstly sought input from stakeholders to gain insight into their experience of the library, its contribution to their work and to student outcomes. These interviews were enlightening; while many interviewees were very positive about the library, making comments such as ‘the library is the heart of the university’, they were not always able to articulate what that meant to them. The interviews also elicited comments that interviewees did not use the library, did not know how the library could contribute to the university strategy and did not think the library had any impact on student engagement and retention. These statements provided a ‘wake up’ call and made it clear that the library strategy needed to reposition the library in this new, post-organizational change environment and communicate our role, direction and value to our stakeholders in a way that they could understand. The new strategy includes a clear message about the library’s contribution to the university’s strategy, our response to our stakeholders’ changing needs and a concise overview of our goals for the next two years. For library staff, it outlines a clear direction for the library and the role library staff will have in contributing to the achievement of our goals. Through the annual performance development and review process, each staff member now has meaningful performance goals and clear performance indicators that directly contribute to the library’s priorities as specified in the library’s strategy and annual business plan.

To achieve the goals that have been established in the library strategy, our existing resources will need to be refocused as we develop new services and cease existing services and work practices. As part of the organizational change process, a ‘start/stop/continue’ exercise, based on data and evidence, was undertaken at team level to determine:

- existing services and work activities that need to be eliminated going forward
- the current work activities which should be handed over to another individual, team or area outside of the Library
- the existing work activities which would continue into the future
- the new services and work activities which would need to be implemented.

The ‘stop/start/continue’ conversations help to understand where we can provide the most value to the university and how services and roles should change to deliver this value. The process provides a structured way to reflect on our services and work activities, review evidence and data, scan the environment and make conscious decisions about where we will put our efforts to provide the best return on investment to the university.

**Building staff capacity and capabilities**

To be able to work effectively in new roles following the restructure, library staff needed clarity and understanding of their individual roles and an opportunity to identify areas for development. ‘Success profiles’, which provide an outline of the essential skills and capabilities needed to be successful in a role, were developed for each role. Each success profile details the purpose of the role (why it exists) and the knowledge, experience, essential capabilities and technical skills required to be successful in that role. Capabilities were identified based on the twenty capabilities deemed core to any role in the university; each capability has four levels (from Foundation to Expert), with each level building on the previous level of expertise for that capability. The success profiles document the required skills and capabilities and can be used to identify specific development areas for individuals and teams, and to support workforce and succession planning; they supplement our generic position descriptions to provide a detailed profile for each role.

The development of success profiles provided insight into the range of skills and capabilities required to deliver our goals. Through the use of success profiles, we have identified the growing need across our workforce for skills such as marketing, stakeholder engagement and data analysis, and for specific behaviours and attitudes, including flexibility, calculated risk-taking and the ability to continually learn and change: attitudes and capabilities which will become even more
critical in a rapidly-changing work environment [Goetsch, 2013]. Staff learning and development is recognised as a priority; we are investing in the development of new skills and capabilities which will allow us to contribute to the University's future direction, while at the same time promoting behaviours and attitudes which will enable the library to respond to and initiate change and future-proof our workforce. The development of a workforce plan will enable us to forecast future workforce requirements to meet the needs and priorities of the organization, identifying gaps and ensuring that new staff have the required attributes. The workforce plan will also enable the Library to engage in succession planning to build the leadership capability needed at all levels of the organization.

Building the culture we need: encouraging innovation and a ‘beta mindset’

Identifying the desired organizational culture, and engendering a collective understanding of expectations, is an important part of an organizational change process [Shepstone & Currie, 2013]. To ensure that La Trobe University Library can continue to respond proactively to changing client needs and adapt as required, we aspire to build a culture that embodies flexibility, empowerment and agility: a culture of innovation which encourages the development of new ideas and new ways of working, balanced with accountability. The culture of an organization often reflects the values, beliefs, behaviours and actions modelled by the leadership team [Schein, 2004], so it has been critical for library managers and team leaders to identify, clarify and model the values and behaviours that exemplify the culture we aspire to and the way we will work in the library. Library values have been identified and workshops with staff for their fit with our desired culture; the library’s values align with and build upon the university’s values and provide a framework for ‘the way we do things around here’.

Changing the culture of the organization is not a simple matter and will take time, but is critical if we are to maintain relevance and respond flexibly as change occurs. Leadership and innovation have been identified as key aspects of the culture we aspire to, and we have deliberately sought opportunities to initiate and take a leadership role in new cross-university projects and services. These include the implementation of a student help zone which offers access to a number of university services through one physical service point in the library; the introduction of research data management across the university; and the development and implementation of a digital literacies framework for the university. These new roles have involved forming new partnerships, making a commitment to ongoing collaboration and taking risks with the introduction of new services. They have also required the development of capabilities that are not part of our traditional skill set. These new service collaborations have helped to reframe the organization’s view of the library, and have enabled the library to become better connected across the university. The projects we have been involved with have provided us with an opportunity to showcase the library’s strengths and expertise and reposition the library as a key contributor to learning and research in the university. These new collaborations have also provided an opportunity for library staff to broaden their skills and potentially improve their career options.

There is always risk involved in moving to new service models and collaborations, and we have been conscious of the need to assess and manage risks when making decisions about new services and collaborations. We have also assessed the risks of not changing, or being slow to respond to opportunities and changing needs. Our aim is to develop a ‘beta mindset’ among library staff which will allow us to adapt and adjust as the environment we work in changes. We are encouraging a mindset that assumes that everything is open to change and can be improved; a service or process is never a final product but constantly evolves in response to client feedback, new needs and limitations. The service or process does not have to be perfect from the start but establishes a solid base on which we can build and improve. We acknowledge and accept that, when we begin a new process, we will not know all the answers. To embrace a beta mindset, a culture of risk-taking is encouraged and each new project becomes an opportunity to learn and to explore new ideas. Risks are identified and managed through the use of a business case and a project management methodology, but some risk must be accepted, and there are no repercussions if the outcomes of new initiative are not perfect. We are able to learn more by trialling new services and processes, and examining what did not work and why, than by crafting a project too carefully and potentially too slowly. A beta mindset allows us to introduce new services and processes more rapidly than we have done previously; the goal is not to achieve perfection in the first instance but instead to continually review, develop and improve (or discard) over time.
Our focus is on continuous improvement in everything we do. The Library’s Quality Framework outlines the methods and processes employed to plan, review and continually improve services and processes. The Framework describes the expectations and responsibilities of library staff in embedding quality and continuous improvement in our work and outlines our preferred methods for reviewing and improving existing services and processes on a regular basis. All proposed improvements are assessed from the clients’ viewpoint for the positive (and potentially negative) impacts they will have and the benefits they will bring. Every library staff member is responsible for quality; improvements and new initiatives can be identified by any staff member.

When operating in a beta mindset, ongoing stakeholder engagement is critical. Universities can be conservative workplaces, and while library staff may feel comfortable with ongoing change and continuous improvement, our clients may not always feel the same way. We engage our stakeholders so that they are part of the development path for new and changing services; their feedback and input informs our planning. They become advisers rather than just users of our services, and we act upon their feedback. Feedback is sought through formal channels (for example, through usability testing of online services) or informally through daily interactions with stakeholders or via online channels such as email and a website feedback link; all feedback is reviewed and, where there are benefits for clients, suggested changes are implemented and the feedback provider notified that their feedback has been incorporated.

_Telling our story_

While we have always placed an emphasis on communication, the process of ongoing change has made it even more important to clearly communicate our message. Internal surveys and anecdotal evidence have shown that, while we believe we are communicating with our stakeholders, the library’s messages are not always being heard. The lack of understanding of the benefits and value the library can offer is not the fault of our stakeholders but a lack of effective communication on our part. If we are to truly have a beta mindset, we need to communicate messages that our stakeholders can understand, and to hear and understand their responses in return. To improve communication, the library has adopted a storytelling approach, seeking stories from our stakeholders about the way they work, the services they use and the effectiveness of these services. Stories are collected in everyday situations as library staff interact with clients, and provide useful insights for our service development. Storytelling is also an effective way to communicate information about the library, creating a ‘pitch’ with key messages. We craft these messages using the analogy of a quest [Macmillan, 2016], identifying the problem to be solved, a desired future state, the solution that the library is offering, the expertise that library staff can bring and a ‘call to action’ to our audience which outlines how we want them to engage. Our communications now tell stories from our stakeholders’ viewpoint rather than our own, focusing on what is of value to them.

_Conclusion_

To develop a culture of agility and innovation that encourages a beta mindset will require sustained effort, constant reinforcement and leadership at all levels of the organization. It will also require the ongoing development of our staff to ensure we have a capable and confident workforce able to deal with whatever opportunities the future may bring. Identifying measures of success for this change in culture is challenging; how will we know when our desired culture is in place, that we have the culture we need to be effective in our organization? We can formally assess this through surveys and further reviews; we can already observe a change in attitude among our staff. They have demonstrated their confidence to take on new roles, use their existing skills in different ways and develop new skills to meet changing demands. But the most valuable indicators of the success of our cultural change will be provided by our stakeholders: how they view and value the library as a key contributor to their, and their students’, success, and whether we are considered central to achieving their goals. The success of this cultural change will be key to whether we simply survive, or actively thrive on the change that will come.
References


