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Inside Pandora’s Box—“Change” Through Adversity: An Organizational Triumph Over Tragedy

by Mary Tinker Massey (University of South Carolina Libraries and Richland County Public Library, Columbia, South Carolina)

Column Editor: Jack G. Montgomery (Western Kentucky University)

COLUMN EDITOR’S NOTE: When I first heard Ms. Massey’s story, I reflected on the incidents described in the recent survey “Eleanor Cook and I conducted for our upcoming ALA editions book on conflict management in library organizations. In fact, the idea for the book came from hearing of another such incident in a large urban library. Although many tragic incidents occur in libraries, they are often never reported and never reported to the greater library community. Ms. Massey’s story is important in that it demonstrates the type of leadership required to survive and grow in the face of such an incident. It also serves to remind us of the critical need to develop our organizations so that we can avert such situations. — JM

Shots fired! With the director critically wounded, a Reference Department meeting was disrupted by gunfire, while a student assistant tried to talk the gunman out of his weapon. Was this merely a staged production at your community theater? No, it was a real modern workplace tragedy at a large southeastern library!

Our organization at that time was over three hundred strong. We labored under an oppressive autocratic management system, and there was a history of mental and emotional abuse through this system. Many people were on the brink of depression and rebellion. One librarian, who had been psychologically and emotionally pushed into a corner and fired, returned to the library to try to get the management to listen. However, it didn’t work out for anyone that day and the results were tragic. The University responded bureaucratically and brought no trauma or counseling intervention. The staff was left to figure things out for themselves. Many people soon left, leaving the ones that stayed to cope the best possible way: through their work.

Two years later a new Director was hired and she began an organizational restructuring project that could be judged today as a triumph of management. I volunteered to be an intermediary between her and the staff, to communicate and mediate new info and policy issues that arose. To begin, I offered a written proposal to set up a representative committee that would receive anonymous or authored complaints/ideas, trying to make library improvements based on those complaints/ideas, and reporting back to the staff at monthly intervals on the progress of those offerings.

We tackled the small issues that regularly occurred and were generally successful. In mediating and resolving these trying issues, the staff became so encouraged by our results that they chose to wait out the more difficult solutions that would take longer to resolve. We began to see a change in the staff’s attitudes toward the administration, the University and their work as well.

Recognizing that organizational change is constant, we adopted procedures that nurtured change, including: providing more information, establishing a personnel oriented communication system (print and electronic), increasing the speed of communications (to manage rumors), improving the internal technological systems (like the intranet) to provide access to everyone, providing avenues for discussing problems, and providing adequate feedback to management on situations.

Sadly, autocratic management provides total management control and directs the staff at all times. This type of management, which is incapable of sharing authority, is focused on task maintenance, defines tasks rigidly, enforces overly formalized rules with programmatic decisions, and sloughs off communication to retain control. The communication flow is always downward and usually written to create trials of “proof.” It places management and staff in an adversarial posture leading to distrust and paranoia on both sides.

On the other hand, the concept of team management requires the staff to share responsibilities and influence decisions. Balanced task focus and social maintenance is sought, as this management system is flexible and seeks consensus allowing for smoother assimilation of new policies and procedures. Creative forms of decision making are ideal, and the communication dynamics become lateral and vertical, alternate.

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<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
Steps in Effecting Organizational Change:

In order to change an organizational system, you must first make an honest and accurate assessment of the current situation. Any manager or group must recognize all of the positive and negative qualities, abilities, and skills that are present. An organization must acknowledge where the positive and negative elements reside in the system, and must be committed to trying new ways of doing things. If necessary, some institutions call in consultants for an unbiased assessment and others form committees to evaluate themselves. If the organization is clearly dysfunctional, a consultant is recommended in order for an objective, factual view to be gleaned. This can be combined with an internal “audit” so that comparisons of perspective can be made and differences of opinion can be discovered.

Second, an organization must work to develop realistic goals and objectives. Our library had each departmental staff develop goals and objectives after reading and understanding the overall goals and objectives of the University and Library. Each person was encouraged to ask themselves the following:

“How can we contribute to the overall ‘raison d’être’ of our place within the organizational whole?”

“How can I contribute to the betterment/success of the department as a whole and how do I define our function within the system?”

As individuals became personally involved with this issue, there were many more contributors than before. People were encouraged to speak up. We wanted the staff to understand that they, in part, controlled and were responsible for their destiny and the Library’s reputation and functionality.

We expanded our procedures and decided how we could possibly change to become more efficient. To this end, “quality circles” were developed between departments. For example, when workflow was discussed, everyone involved in its completion was present to examine ideas and propose changes. As a result, we found a great source of creativity in our midst with many constructive ideas for change. We found policies changing, workflows becoming more streamlined, and people becoming more integrated with each other and their work. The quality circles became a source for communication that continued as an organizational dynamic. There were both internal and external newsletters available to allow staff members to be involved in organizational projects. Our system not only allowed for free expression of issues, but provided a positive view to patrons and prospective donors of our willingness to focus on developing a positive and productive institution. We developed into an institution on the “cutting edge” of technology and “information brokerage.” We established a “Staff Concerns Committee” to handle internal problems, developed creative idea circles, and established an Administrative Council to broaden decision-making and the consultative structure. We succeeded in petitioning for adding a support staff to that Council (which brought favorable results). Everyone in the institution was now represented by some form of action group.

Our next step was to form a “Staff Development Committee/Group.” This group would promote the professional and personal development of every staff member. Monthly meetings brought in speakers on various subjects of interest to the staff (ideas were from the staff). The first statewide “Staff Development Conference” was organized and hosted by our library. The response from all over the United States was wonderful and our staff was able to present one-on-one sessions for the attendees and help introduce them to new technology. Our library was able to exhibit pride in their knowledge and skills and the organization’s morale soared, as it was a joint effort. The Committee also established a series of lectures from each departmental and branch area on “Why people should work with you.” This was the beginning of a creative cross-departmental training arrangement open to anyone in the library. A staff member could contract with an area they wanted to work in and their own, to work for a set number of hours per week (10-20 hours) for a given length of time (say 3-6 months). They would be trained in the new area and evaluated on their work in that area alone, but also evaluated on the extent of hours they maintained in their own original areas of work. Each department received their time which was contracted, and evaluated on that basis only. The administrative office figured out their rating with the combination of evaluations and sent that on to personnel. We found both professional and support staff taking advantage of this opportunity and some people actually finding areas of interest they had not previously known. Some changed their professional aspirations and some actually changed their positions permanently in the system and were happier. Why not make the best use of your staff? Why not offer them a chance to be better trained staff members? Happy campers are very productive people!

Now, I must revert to the beginning when I talked about the new Director coming into a dysfunctional system. One of the thoughts I tried to drive home in our initial meetings was that the professional staff was not trained to be supervisors. They were uncomfortable with the situation as the staff members. We all seemed to be treading water in this area. Could the Library help this situation? The Director arranged with the University to hold a one-week session off-campus. The Personnel Division gave instruction on how to be a supervisor, Dos & Don’ts, with practice situations. The Director provided her philosophy of what she wanted to do with the system, and where she envisioned it going. The results were marvelous. We had managers/facilitators that were more visible, approachable, listened more, and leaders that we desperately needed. The philosophy became more accepting of us as workers, and we found the atmosphere more collegial. We helped the supervisors find new ways to utilize the talents and interests of the professionals. Some established new databases for the University researchers, some worked on bibliographic/collection building teams with other internal and external representatives, and some taught us new skills.

Our example of need for change was certainly an extreme case, but our ways of dealing with those needs could apply to any institution. Our goal is to provide the most correct, efficient and timely access to information possible to our patrons. If we do this in an environment of positive teamwork, we are more apt to complete our mission and be proud of the results as well as ourselves for a job well done.

Rumors

2002-03 analyzed salary data from a number of different perspectives, including race, ethnicity, and gender. Minority librarians comprise only 12.4% of the professional staff in U.S. ARL university libraries; the number of minorities in managerial or administrative positions is even lower. Women comprise 69.3% of minority staff members. Gender-based salary differentials continue. The overall salary for women in the 114 ARL university libraries is 94.1% of that paid to men; this figure compares to 94.2% in 2001-02. While the data shows a marked closure of the gender gap in ARL libraries over the long term—in 1980-81, women in ARL libraries made roughly 87% that of men—it also raises the possibility that the closure has peaked, and that a five or six percent gap between men’s and women’s salaries may persist. Other characteristics of ARL university libraries, such as size, public/private status, and location were also significant determinants of salary. Overall, a pattern appears to persist of libraries’ proportion of materials and operating expenditures increasing faster than salaries. http://www.ualr.edu/press/333/order/.

There are so many Rumors out there! But, since we started with a Tony Ferguson Rumor <ferguson@hkuc.hku.hk>, I thought it would be symmetrical to end with one. I asked Tony of all his respiritory disease out of Hong Kong has affected them over there at the Hong Kong University Library. Here is what he wrote back: “Indeed we have purchased masks for all to wear as an option (smile drawn on the mask to reduce the scare factor). Chinese U has closed their medical library. Their staff are wearing gloves and masks. The hospital with the most cases is quite near their medical school. Melanie Hawks and Barclay Ogden are the brave trainers. We do lose two participants from Taiwan and Singapore each due to the fear factor. Anytime anyone sneezes everyone runs. But we are ok.” Anyway, HKU is holding their first annual library leadership institute the end of March. Life marches on. Be safe, Tony!