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Carmel O'Sullivan & Helen Partridge

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# ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

Organisational change and renewal: can strategic communication methods ease the pain? A case study from the University of Southern Queensland

Carmel O'Sullivan and Helen Partridge

Library Services, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia

Correspondence to: Carmel O'Sullivan, Library Services, University of Southern Queensland, West Street, Toowoomba 4350, Australia. E-mail: Carmel.OSullivan@usq.edu.au

## ABSTRACT

Strategic communication is not solely the remit of library managers and directors, but is the product of internal culture and engagement with the organisation's brand. Libraries need to communicate strategically, in order to demonstrate to individuals across the organisation that their message is on point, and that they understand, are committed to, and actively support the university's goals. Much of this work happens via the myriad of interactions library staff at all levels have with students and staff (and indeed community members) of all kinds. When the attitude and behaviour of library staff does not truly reflect the library's and the university's branding or goals, this undermines more explicit measures of value.

It is important for the leadership of academic libraries to understand and influence how every library staff member views his or her role in the organisation, so that their communication is reflective of a confidence in themselves and their profession, and a solid understanding of their institution and the higher education landscape.

In large-scale organisational change, both intellectual and emotional buy-in to the organisation can wane. We seek to show how a people-centred change process, rather than adversely affecting staff buy-in, could instead increase buy-in to the organisational change.

# ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

Organisational change and renewal: can strategic communication methods ease the pain? A case study from the University of Southern Queensland.

## **Introduction**

In management literature, “person-organisation value congruence” and “buy-in” to the organisation’s goals have been demonstrated to positively influence organisational commitment, work performance, job satisfaction and turnover (de Chernatony, 2006, p 822). We suggest that this value congruence also influences communication styles and messaging, and that where academic library staff have personal values that align deeply with their perceptions of the university’s values, their communication within and beyond the library is more deeply engaging. In this paper, we review the literature on strategic communication, and apply it to a higher education context. We then discuss a case study -- an organisational change process underway at the University of Southern Queensland Library - and demonstrate how the principles of strategic communication are assisting in making that process successful.

## **Strategic Communication and Brand Ambassadors**

In marketing and business communication literature, strategic communication may be understood as high level formal communication from an organisation’s corporate communication or public relations department. However, for this paper, we focus on the view of strategic communication as a product of internal culture and engagement with the organisation’s brand.

As Sandhu notes,

*“Organizations are embedded in a social web of rules, norms and cognitive assumptions, which form expectations for the organizations that enable, shape or constrain strategic communication” (2009, p75)*

We see as particularly relevant for the higher education sector, the emergence of a communication organisation where all employees have a role in communication -- not just the

marketing or corporate communications section. For service industries in particular, the role played by client-facing employees in communicating and supporting the organisation's brand is powerful.

Williams and Omar describe higher education institutions as operating in a service industry, noting that the work of these institutions is “focused on people; involves largely intangible actions; requires lengthy and formal relationship of continuous delivery with the customer; depends upon high levels of customization and judgment; maintains relatively narrow fluctuations of demand relative to supply; and operates within single or multiple sites of service delivery methods” (2014, p2). Within the higher education sector, all employees are “consumer touch points”, and therefore all employees play an important role in developing the institution's reputation, and giving it a “soul” (Williams, 2014, p2).

One of the most important strategic communicative actions of employees, according to Mazzei, is as company brand ambassadors (2014, p86). Undoubtedly academic staff are key brand ambassadors for a university. Work by Jillapalli and Jillapalli (2014) looked at the strength of attachment to and satisfaction with professors' “brands”, and extrapolated that strong professor brands contribute positively to the overall brand of the university (2014, p37).

While the professor-student relationship is undeniably crucial to student perception of and attachment to the institution, other service professionals, including library staff also play an important role as brand ambassadors. Libraries and other student support areas may encounter students who are at risk of developing a poor relationship with the institution. Libraries are typically open for much longer hours than any other service point in a university, and library spaces operate as the “third space” for students -- where they spend time socialising, studying,

and collaborating. The contribution of library workers to the institution's brand and reputation is significant.

Mazzei describes employees as active agents in communication who can produce a competitive advantage (2014, pp82-83). Internal communication strategies are a useful lever for enabling both managers and employees to become strategic communicators (Mazzei, 2014, p83). She recommends seven communication strategies (2014, pp87-88) to promote employee engagement

1. Create a communication path,
2. Employ a transparent style,
3. Build trust,
4. Train managers to be good communicators,
5. Build accountability for corporate values (understand what the organisation stands for).
6. Articulate a mutual benefit for the employee and organisation,
7. Adopt many small practices to reinforce the motivation.

The USQ Library has endeavoured to adopt several of these strategies in its process of change and renewal.

If we look specifically at the strategy of building accountability for corporate values, we see that universities and the academic libraries within them, need to ensure that all staff understand the organisation's *raison d'être*. "To have an impact on staff behaviour, brand values need to be communicated to, comprehended by, accepted and internalised by staff." (de Chernatony, 2006, p820). Shared understandings communicated clearly throughout the organisation lead to common beliefs and conceptions on how things ought to be (Sandhu, 2009, p81).

Thomson et al describe this internalisation of brand as a process of both intellectual and emotional buy-in (Thomson, de Chernatony, Arganbright and Khan, 1999 p825). Intellectual buy-in refers to staff understanding the organisation's goals, while emotional buy-in refers to staff commitment to the organisation's brand. Developing trust is a key part of developing employee buy-in. Employees with high intellectual and emotional buy-in contribute positively to the organisation's intellectual and emotional capital. A strong and consistent sense of "how we do things here", as well as a positive sense of "how we feel about what we do here" are signs of this buy-in.

Thomson et al describe employees with a clear understanding of the organisation's goals as understanding what they need to do. Those who also have a strong commitment to the organisation's values are "champions" of the organisation who are committed to delivering for the organisation. In contrast, employees may operate as "bystanders" if they know what they need to do, but lack emotional commitment to the organisation. Similarly, employees may have strong commitment to the organisation's values, but without a proper understanding of the organisation's goals, become "loose cannons" who, with the best of intentions, aren't delivering for the organisation (Thomson, de Chernatony, Arganbright and Khan, 1999, p828).

Disturbingly, Thomson et al found that some 39% of surveyed managers and employees lacked both intellectual and emotional buy-in to the organisation. These "weak links" are switched off and neither understand the goals of the organisation, nor are committed to the organisation's values. A similar number (37%) were described as organisational "champions", with the remaining 24% lower in either intellectual or emotional buy-in.

In order to improve buy-in, Thomson et al unsurprisingly recommend improved communication as a key strategy (Thomson, de Chernatony, Arganbright and Khan, 1999, pp829-831). They recommend actions such as involving staff at all levels in key business issues and enabling them to share their views, demonstrating how employees contribute to the organisation's success, and recognising their needs and priorities (Thomson, de Chernatony, Arganbright and Khan, 1999, pp830-831). These are certainly strategies that the University of Southern Queensland Library has found some success with.

Naidoo and Wu (2011) reinforce the research by Thomson et al in the context of university recruitment of international students. The extent of understanding by employees of how the marketing strategy they are charged with implementing aligns with the university's strategy is crucial to the success of the recruitment activity. Naidoo and Wu report on the importance of internal communication to enable buy in from the employees charged with marketing to international students, noting that "mid-level managers are more likely to be committed to their role if they possess a comprehensive understanding of how their roles contribute to the university's overall strategic direction" (Naidoo and Wu, 2011, pp1134-1135). Further, "cross functional support and buy-in appears to be critical to improve strategic commitment and ultimately implementation success." (Naidoo and Wu, 2011, p1135). This is an important observation in the higher education context. Naidoo and Wu refer to support and buy-in from academic staff in particular to reinforce the marketing strategy, but as students (in this case international students) encounter university employees in a variety of support services including libraries, the support and buy-in to the organisation's strategic direction, goals and values from those employees is also key to the success of the university's activities and initiatives.



## **The Higher Education Sector in Australia**

Higher education is critical to Australia's future. There are 38 public universities and 3 private universities in Australia. In 2013 Australia's universities taught almost 1.3 million students, employed 115,000 staff, contributed \$25 billion to the national economy and accounted for more than 1.5% of Australia's Gross Domestic Product (Universities Australia, 2015). In terms of complexity, and impact on society and the country's economy, this sector is extremely important. Australia's universities are largely government funded, and are subject to close regulation and scrutiny by governments. The challenge of providing a high quality university system that is able to meet the "increasing demand for high level skills in our economy and the aspirations of our students, has been an ongoing concern for successive Australian governments over many years" (Department of Education and Training, 2015, p. 4). There have been six significant reviews of the Australian higher education system in the last thirty years (Bradley, 2008; Dawson, 1987; Kemp & Norton, 2014; Lomax-Smith, 2011; Nelson, 2003; West, 1998). The reviews have looked at similar issues, including (i) the need for additional high levels skills in the economy to fuel productivity and innovation, (ii) the expansion of higher education to include students of diverse social, economic and academic backgrounds; and (iii) finding the appropriate mix of resources necessary to fund higher education activities. The current Australian Commonwealth Government challenges the nation's universities to "ensure our students enjoy the best higher education choices in the world and that Australia is not left behind by global competition" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014). Recognizing that "the Australian economy is moving from a heavy reliance on mining and manufacturing to a new era in which skills, knowledge and ideas will become our most precious commodities" (Universities Australian, 2015, p. 1), in 2015

Universities Australia released Keep It Clever, a policy statement that calls on the development of a university system that is responsive, flexible and agile. The statement acknowledges that Australia's universities must educate for innovation and entrepreneurialism, it must collaborate closely with industry and commerce and it must produce informed, globally connected graduates to create and fill the jobs of the future.

## **Valuing Academic Libraries**

In an increasingly complex higher education sector, in which universities are required to be more innovative, competitive, and lean, all parts of a university must contribute to the institution's strategic goals. Over time, academic libraries have sought to demonstrate their value by collecting gate and loan statistics, running satisfaction surveys, producing engagement analytics, and undertaking building and space surveys. Tenopir (2011, p6) reports that libraries typically measure value via "implicit value" (usage equating to value), "explicit value" (qualitative data such as surveys and interviews), and "derived value" (return on investment comparing cost and benefit). Libraries are also increasingly embarking on strategies to demonstrate correlation between library usage and student achievement, as was the case with the JISC funded Library Impact Data Project (Stone, 2012).

Beyond these measures, libraries need to demonstrate value to those within the organisation with the power to support projects, fund initiatives, prioritise capital works and advocate for the library in other ways. These individuals may not be researchers or teachers who have a deep understanding of the value proposition of the library. Libraries need to demonstrate to individuals across the organisation (whether or not they are classic library users) that their message is on point, that they understand, are committed to, and actively support the university's

goals. Much of this work happens outside of formal reporting to executive. It happens via the myriad of interactions library staff at all levels have with students and staff (and indeed community members) of all kinds. When the attitude and behaviour of library staff does not truly reflect the library's and the university's branding or goals, this undermines more explicit measures of value.

One of the most consistent aims of academic libraries' liaison strategies is to achieve genuine collaboration between librarians and academics as a result of shared understanding of the organisation's value (Pham and Tanner, 2014). Librarians want to move from a subservient relationship to a more collegiate relationship. In his landmark book "The Trusted Advisor" (aimed at legal, accounting, banking and other professional services industries), David Maister describes a progression from being a subject matter or process expert, through broadening one's expertise to associated fields, becoming a valued resource, and finally becoming a "trusted advisor" (2000, p7). A trusted advisor has both depth of personal relationship with their client, and an understanding of a breadth of business issues. While academic librarians might hope to be seen as trusted advisors, achievement of this goal often seems to have eluded them in practice. This may be partly attributable to librarians concentrating on their subject and process expertise at the expense of demonstrating a breadth of understanding of business issues that are relevant to the organisation as a whole.

## **The University of Southern Queensland Experience**

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is a regional university with a student demographic that is dominated by off-campus and online students, with over 50% first-in-family students, and over one third low socio-economic-status students (University of Southern

Queensland, 2015). Having been a higher education institution for just under fifty years, and gaining university status in 1992, USQ is a very young university competing in a dynamic market dominated by established players. Communicating value, quality, and point of difference is crucial for USQ's success in the Australian and global higher education market.

USQ Library operates on three campuses in south east Queensland, with approximately 60 library staff members serving a student population of 17,000 EFTSU or 29,000 enrolments, and around 700 academic staff. USQ Library is passionate about continuous improvement and providing the best quality resources and programs to meet the current and future needs of its clients. In the current information rich and digitally complex environment, there is a need to reconsider what the USQ Library of the future could and should be, if it is to continue meeting the evolving needs of the clients and community it serves.

In late 2014, the Library embarked on a process to position itself better to serve the future needs of the University. "Vision 2022" was developed to be a future focused initiative responding to the following complex question: "In 2022 the USQ library could ....?" The outcomes of Vision 2022 will be many and varied, through this initiative the USQ Library will:

- (i) Engage with clients in new and different ways around the future of the Library;
- (ii) Enable library staff to identify trends that may impact academic library services into the future,
- (iii) Explore alternative futures and devise strategic responses to the identified trends, and
- (iv) Establish an evidence base to inform workforce planning and to guide strategic planning.

The initiative has been intentionally designed to be both creative and inclusive. Embarking on large-scale change in any organisation is a challenge, but doing so in a way that totally engages

every staff member is something rare and potentially quite powerful. USQ Library's Vision 2022 initiative is an attempt to do just this. As architects of this initiative, the authors consider that engaging staff is a strategic imperative, and that the process of staff participation in Vision 2022 is an end in itself. By equipping staff to understand the higher education context in which USQ operates, USQ's strategic goals more deeply, and their role in USQ's research and education endeavours, we believe that staff at all levels will contribute powerfully to our strategic communication process.

Vision 2022 began in October 2014. Through the initiative the Library connected with and engaged traditional stakeholders such as academic staff and students; looked at data on current and anticipated future library needs, and took the opportunity to help educate library clients about potential (perhaps unconsidered) future. Most importantly, the initiative connected with and engaged library staff at all levels.

The USQ Library leadership team used a variety of methods to build capacity for library staff to fully understand and participate in the change process. These included workshops, research and writing projects, and professional development opportunities. Focusing on evidence based practice, USQ library staff were able to proactively identify future directions for USQ library, rather than have new ideas and changes imposed upon them. These methods enabled staff to move towards a state of self-confidence and self-efficacy, and enabled them to push the process in directions they identified as important for USQ.

The USQ Library worked on a variety of fronts to develop staff buy-in to the process of change, and enhance their understanding both of the university strategy and goals, and the higher education context in which they operate. Some of the activities the Library undertook included

- Staff and student engagement via open questions about future states of the library posted on public chalkboards, allowing passers-by to write their thoughts and responses.
- Student engagement in the question of what are the most important services and spaces in the USQ Library now, and in 2022 via peer-led activities in scheduled “meet-up” groups.
- Academic and professional staff engagement via small focus-group discussions.
- The preparation of short videos by library staff on a variety of topics including “library in your pocket”, “maker spaces”, “what is a digital library”, and “academic library spaces.” These were used online as conversation starters, and during focus-group discussions.
- Library staff workshops on communication, collaboration and planning.
- Library staff workshops on the change process, how it feels, how to develop strategies to deal with change, and how to support each other through change.
- A large-scale environmental scan project involving every library staff member in one of nine topic groups. These topic groups reported both via a written opportunities document, and a presentation to the entire library staff.

The environmental scan process in particular led library staff to explore the university’s strategic plan, and other planning documents in more detail, to understand the higher education context in Australia, and to look closely at best practice in academic libraries both in Australia and globally in a variety of themed areas. The intellectual buy-in to the University’s goals resulting from this activity has been significant, while the inclusiveness of the process has enabled staff members to see that their contributions are valued, and consequently has had a positive effect on emotional buy-in to the organisation.

## **Applying Mazzei's Strategies**

The changes that USQ Library has implemented internally (and continues to build upon) fit within the seven strategies identified by Mazzei (2014, p87-88).

1. Create a communication path.

Both the external review of USQ Library (conducted in December 2014), and the consultant's report (delivered in April 2015, after a series of staff workshops), identified communication as one of the major impediments to success for USQ library. To address this gap, all staff were invited to experiment with Google+ as an informal communication space. In order to enable engagement by staff from areas, and with widely varying digital literacy skills, strategies were put in place to share responsibility for moderating the space, and mentor less technically-savvy staff to learn to use the space. After more than a year of operation, Google + remains the primary method of sharing ideas and discussing projects for all library staff. For a team spread over several campuses this platform worked well to build a shared community space, and combat the sense of one campus being privileged over the others.

As USQ Library's structure was very narrow, with a three person executive, a broader leadership team was instituted, comprising approximately 16% of the total staff. This leadership team was established with a view to enabling broader participation in decision making, and a more free flow of information. The leadership group now has better access to budgetary information, and is able to discuss key messages and explain strategy to the broader staff group. By broadening the group which has access to key information, and which makes decisions, the USQ Library aims to widen the capacity for information to flow through the organisation.

## 2. Employ a transparent style.

Several small changes have been put in place to make the operations of the Library more transparent to staff. These include measures to make budget processes and details clear to staff at all levels, to make decisions about professional development opportunities more collaborative and open, and to make more explicit our expectations around staff behaviour.

## 3. Build trust.

Library staff met the suggestion of the Vision 2022 process with some scepticism, and initially the degree of engagement in some workshops and discussions was mixed. Staff at all levels were required to participate in all activities associated with Vision 2022, and for some, this was a new expectation. Over time, and particularly through the environmental scanning exercise, marked changes were observed in the level of engagement of some staff at lower grades in particular, who became more comfortable with the expectation that they participate in discussions in the same way as librarians and those in leadership positions. The introduction of more open decision making processes, and the consistent message that library staff would be architects of their own future, supported by action, fostered a greater sense of trust within the staff body.

## 4. Train managers to be good communicators.

While USQ Library has not yet embarked on a communication training program for managers, the Director has taken the approach of mentoring individuals within the leadership team, and of assisting them to manage the performance of their staff members, especially when it comes to communication. By making explicit what types of communication styles are appropriate and what is not, and by gently guiding staff at all levels to improve their communication style, USQ Library hopes to promote employee engagement, and influence organisational culture. The



expectation is that this work will change the leadership team's shared understanding of "how we do things around here", and in turn, they will influence the wider library team's understanding of what is usual for USQ Library.

5. Build accountability for corporate values (understand what the organisation stands for).

The environmental scan process was instrumental in leading staff at all levels to research and report on the University's values, goals and strategies, and seek out opportunities for best practice for USQ library in a variety of areas.

6. Articulate a mutual benefit for the employee and organisation,

The proposed new structure for USQ Library has been articulated partly in terms of the benefits for employees of clearer career paths, and enhanced opportunities for specialisation and for leadership. By listening to staff first, via the consultant's work, and via several series of staff workshops, the proposed organisational change was able to be designed around the issues identified by staff. The leadership team were also able to adopt many of the strategies proposed by staff themselves in their environmental scan reports.

7. Adopt many small practices to reinforce the motivation.

Small initiatives such as regular, informal updates, more transparent processes around professional development opportunities, the reintroduction of more structured planning processes, along with the other initiatives already mentioned here, have reinforced to staff that they matter not just to the library but to the university, and that their contribution will influence the future direction and success of the USQ library.

## **Early Results**

In late 2015, one year after the Vision 2022 initiative commenced, the official change process was initiated at USQ Library. This was in some ways the culmination of the engagement process, and in other ways the beginning of the real work of creating the new USQ Library.

The formal change process has been embraced and understood by library staff, who are able to clearly see the results of their own work reflected in the change proposal, and are equally able to understand the purpose of the change and how it reflects the university's priorities. Feedback received as part of this change process has been overwhelmingly positive, with Library staff articulating their understanding of the issues, and approval of both the methods employed to arrive at the restructure proposal, and the proposal itself. This restructure proposal affects all staff at all levels in the Library, and could be described as a "sweeping change." While at the time of writing, the process was still underway, at this stage, the level of positive engagement from library staff has been very encouraging.

## **Conclusion**

Libraries and librarians understand well how to "do" communication. They understand the value of clear messaging, strong relationships and effective planning for communication. What might be less well understood is how librarians' sense of self and ideas about their place in the organisation impact their communication styles. In this paper, we argued that by looking deeper at their own motivation, values, experiences, and understandings of the library profession and the higher education environment, library staff at all levels can communicate more effectively. Strategic communication is not solely the remit of library managers and directors, but is important for staff at all levels in the library to understand. When library staff members (at any

level) view themselves as other to or separate from the university itself, or don't have a deep understanding of and empathy for their clients and colleagues, their communication will reflect those perceptions. It is important to understand and influence how every library staff member views his or her role in the organisation so that their communication is reflective of a confidence in themselves and their profession, and a solid understanding of their institution and the higher education landscape.

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