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Catherine Clark, Carolyn Hofmeester, and Jane Pritchard, "Courage and co-creation: Cultural transformation in an academic library." *Proceedings of the IATUL Conferences*. Paper 2.
<https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/iatul/2018/beyondnow/2>

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COURAGE AND CO-CREATION: CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN AN ACADEMIC LIBRARY

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Abstract

University libraries are transforming to be vibrant and distinctive online and physical spaces that, at their heart, continue to foster the connection of people to ideas. Rapid and continuously changing expectations of clients in the range of services that are delivered by libraries, combined with increasingly demanding resourcing environments are challenges for all library leaders. A library staff culture that is energised, focused and resilient is essential to ensure that service expectations are met or exceeded and that the library retains its valued position in the university.

The University Librarian at Curtin University in Australia has initiated and led a library staff culture transformation program over an 18-month period. The program has adopted an empowerment mindset to increase commitment, involvement and optimism amongst library staff. The need for such a transformative program was identified following a particularly difficult period of staff disruption. The 'Appreciative Inquiry' dialogic method was used to facilitate a whole of library engagement and activity program that commenced with a two day 'Library Challenge' event. The event brought together library staff, students and academics to identify the desired culture along with a roadmap to meet that goal.

The Your Voice Satisfaction Survey (Your Voice), a research validated employee satisfaction and engagement survey, was used to evaluate the Curtin University Library culture program with the survey being run before, and during the program's implementation. Results show significant shifts in staff engagement as the culture program has been rolled out, particularly in the areas of commitment, involvement and positive outlook.

This paper will outline the staff culture transformation program at Curtin University Library with an emphasis on the skills and attitudes required by library leaders to ensure success in this critical area of leadership.

Keywords

Leadership, Higher education, Organisational culture, Organisational change, Libraries

Introduction

Curtin University is one of Australia's largest and youngest universities and ranked in the top one percent of universities worldwide (2017 Academic Ranking of World Universities). Curtin

has over 4,000 research, teaching and professional staff located in Malaysia, Mauritius, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates and Western Australia. Over 58,000 students are enrolled each year and there are also a significant number of students who study online including through EdX, an international global partnership of 90 universities.

Curtin University Library (the Library) has approximately 90 full-time equivalent staff who are supported by 60 Library Student Assistants to deliver services online and physically from four sites in Western Australia and at each of Curtin's other four campuses across the globe. The Library makes a vital contribution to the University's learning, teaching and research missions by providing access to scholarly information resources, academic skills and information literacy programs, and research support.

To meet the complex and rapidly changing higher education environment the Library has in the past adopted incremental changes in building its strong reputation for innovation and client focus. A shift away from the incremental approach became necessary due to budget pressures in 2015 resulting in job losses and restructuring that threatened to destabilise the Library's work culture. The Your Voice survey of employee satisfaction at that time revealed much lower commitment and higher levels of discontent and disengagement than previously experienced. A series of focus groups for all Library staff and several individual interviews were initiated by the University Librarian to probe more deeply into the specific issues and concerns behind the survey feedback. The focus groups and interviews highlighted significant distress among staff, the surfacing of unresolved legacy issues and a significant risk of entrenching degenerative cultural dialogues – negativity, animosity, blame, disengagement and breaking of relationships.

Literature Review

The term 'change management' emerged in the 1990s as an organisational development methodology in response to rapidly changing and increasingly complex business environments. The early approaches tended to be either focussed on structural and system changes or managing the staff impacted by the change (Jones & Recardo, 2013). Many contemporary models of change management such as Kotter's eight step approach (Kotter, 2011) recognise the importance of bringing together both the hard structural and systems change as well as attention to the consequences for staff. However, a consistent and long standing approach to people impacted by change is centred on their resistance or reluctance to change, which is seen to require top-down management by those leading the change¹. In a similar vein PROSCI, which is considered a leader in the development of change management methodology and tools, defines change management as "...the discipline that guides how we prepare, equip and support individuals to successfully *adopt change* in order to drive organizational success and outcomes" (emphasis added) (PROSCI, 2017).

In practice, successful change management has proven elusive (Aitkin, Keller, & Rennie, 2008; Beer & Nohria, 2011; By, 2005; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008). Research is now supporting the need for recalibrating the balance between the traditional managerial approach and more empowering approaches to successfully navigate the more complex, diverse, turbulent and interdependent work environment (Bushe & Marshak, 2016; Cooperrider, 2012). Research by Heynoski and Quinn (2012) show that an organisation's potential in changing environments is harnessed when staff are empowered to become partners in creating possibility, trust and learning. Rather than adopting prescribed change, the research is suggesting that successful transformation requires staff to be engaged in understanding and participating in the design and implementation of change.

Leaders require courage to make the necessary shift from 'managing' the change to 'enabling' an all-inclusive environment for the co-creation of change by constantly finding ways for

¹ Kurt Lewin's three phase approach for managing change assumes that resistance is present in any change process. (Brewer 1995)

managers and staff to diagnose, design and deliver high performance (Aitkin et al., 2008). Courage is one of Curtin University's espoused values and is described as the courage to lead, take responsibility and question (Curtin University, 2018). According to Sen, Kabak et al. (2013) courage as a core leadership practice is about "...accepting responsibility, being able to go against the grain, breaking traditions, reducing boundaries and initiating change" (p. 94). Courageously using an empowerment approach is also consistent with the idea of fearless leadership. Such leaders foster an inclusive approach, deflect attention away from themselves and encourage others to voice their opinions. Fearless leaders create work environments where staff can feel safe to speak up, confidently question and share their points of view (Barrett Values Centre, 2017, p.6).

Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 2012; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavos, 2008) was identified as an ideal method to maximise participation and the co-creation of a clear direction and a strong positive work culture at Curtin Library. The approach creates empowerment by engaging the whole system in a mode of inquiry and dialogue that fosters positivity, innovation and openness to change. This is driven by the key propositions underpinning Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2008 "AI: A Brief Introduction", para.6)

- Inquiry into 'the art of the possible' in organizational life should begin with appreciation of strengths, competencies and positive energy that reside in all human systems.
- Inquiry into what is possible should yield information that is applicable, applied and validated in action.
- Inquiry into what is possible should be provocative, open-ended and evolutionary.
- Inquiry into the human potential of organizational life should be collaborative.

The Appreciative Inquiry approach when coupled with Appreciative Leadership (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, & Rader, 2010) provides further strengthening of empowering, inclusive and relational practices. Through Appreciative Leadership, teams are motivated to create positive change, to shape how things are done and the results achieved. This positive power can be multileveled – as personal capacity, collective capacity and organisational capacity. It has been shown that the cultivation of these practices encourages more openness to hearing and learning from others, greater risk tolerance and less fear of criticism and blame (Whitney et al., 2010). This type of transformational leadership reflects a shift from the dominant leadership mindset where top-down, vision setting, and performance management is replaced by a more adaptive leadership mindset which fosters and encourages staff and stakeholders to propose and act on their own solutions. It is a leadership style that is based on practices of inquiry and learning rather than command and control. The evidence is mounting that this is much more conducive to sustainable organisational effectiveness in an increasingly complex world (Aitkin et al., 2008; Bushe & Marshak, 2016; Richardson & Vandenberg, 2005).

Method

In response to the Curtin University Library staff's challenges of self-reported lower commitment and higher levels of discontent and disengagement than previously experienced, a transformative approach was initiated by the University Librarian during 2016 with the theme 'embrace a Library culture that values staff'. The initiative included a range of strategies and activities which centred on employee engagement and empowerment. The positive and strengths-based principles of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2008) were fundamental to the approach taken in co-creating a new shared vision and desirable work culture.

The Curtin Library journey of creating an empowered culture through this method, began with the adoption of a whole of system participatory approach to cultural transformation. An invitation was sent to all staff to form a cross functional collaborative project team that was tasked with designing and driving what became known as the Library Challenge. The team set out to engage all staff, students and faculty to create a shared vision and desired work culture for the Library. The Library Challenge team used the concept of a 'musical jam session' or

“Values Jam” (Aitkin et al., 2008) to bring people together in an open space to harness and share ideas over a two day period. Participants in the Library Challenge were encouraged to use innovative, creative and fun ways and a diverse range of mediums (including iPads, flipcharts, sticky notes, drawings and creative writing) to share ideas that enabled the Appreciative Inquiry process of Discovery (the Library’s core strengths), Dream (the Library’s vision), Design (the desired work culture) and Deliver (tangible results) to unfold. Openness and transparency was fostered by sharing every single idea, opinion and viewpoint on the Library’s vision and work culture with all staff and demonstrating how these were linked to the co-created shared vision and supporting goals.

This content rich feedback that emerged was shaped into a powerful new vision for the Library: *"A library with great heart that empowers great minds"*.

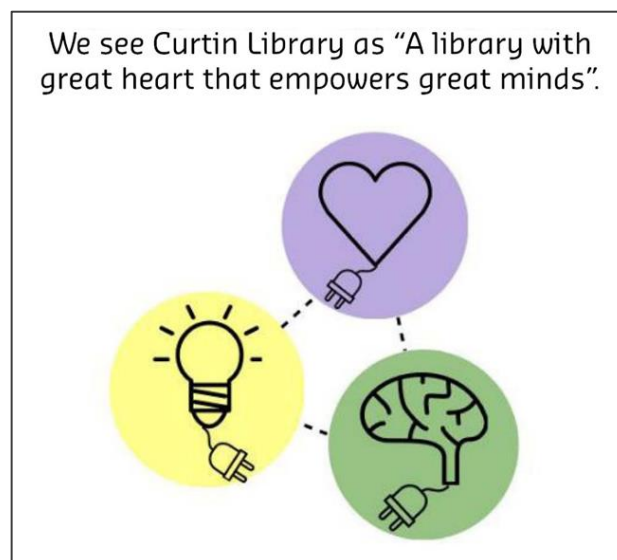


Figure 1: Curtin Library Vision

The highly participatory and creative process enabled important ideas to emerge from the ground that have been designed into the work culture. The process gave voice to the strong desire for ‘porous boundaries’ that reflected the need for greater structural flexibility, cross team collaborations and use of hidden talents in the way staff across the Library work together. The need for more inspirational leadership also surfaced as a challenge to be taken up by the Library’s leadership team.

Specifically the goals that were co-created through the Library Challenge were:

1. Positive relationships in our workplace by cultivating trust and confidence in ourselves and each other.
2. Flexibility in working together by reducing reliance on hierarchy, creating more porous team boundaries, and by making best use of our talents.
3. Greater effectiveness in how we enhance our performance and resolve conflicts.
4. Greater transparency in our communications and decision-making.
5. Having inspirational leadership.

In order to achieve these goals, which are both broad and deep in their intent, a series of actions and projects were initiated over an 18 month timeframe. A number of the actions required external expertise such as the development and delivery of a comprehensive conflict management program and associated training for all Library staff. The Library leadership team also embarked on further development of their Appreciative Leadership capabilities. For most

actions however, Library staff once again self-selected to work together to bring about the desired change.

Results

Progress on the beneficial outcomes of the Library's transformational program is being tracked via the independently administered Your Voice employee satisfaction survey. The 2017 survey was conducted six months into the Library Challenge and the results are showing a positive shift in the work culture². Example results are shown in Table 1 below.

Survey question / area	2014/15 Percentage agreement	2017 Percentage agreement	Percentage improvement
I am encouraged to give feedback about the things that concern me	71	84	13
My supervisor/line manager keeps people informed about what is going on	59	85	26
I am consulted before decision that affect me are made	36	52	16
There is good cooperation between work areas at Curtin	36	49	13
I feel a sense of loyalty and commitment to Curtin	58	76	18
I am proud to tell people I work at Curtin	73	80	7
Job Satisfaction (overall)	79	82	3
Supervision (overall)	55	78	23

Table 1: Your Voice Survey results 2014/15 and 2017 - percentage agreement with individual statements and overall themed areas

Regular face to face and survey feedback is being used to ensure that the actions are meeting the intended outcomes. The results so far are encouraging with notable shifts in employee commitment, involvement and positive outlook.

The majority of staff feel empowered, comfortable with putting forward ideas for improvement and feel involved in decision making. The results are consistently higher than the pre-Library Challenge survey results and against the Australian Universities benchmark. These results have provided positive feedback on the empowerment approach initiated by the University Librarian.

² The program implementation roadmap draws to a close at the end of June 2018 and a Your Voice survey is planned towards the end of 2018 to continue the monitoring of the program's effectiveness.

In focusing resources on staff development and empowerment, it was important to ensure that the client experience continued at the high level that the University has come to expect. The 2017 LibQUAL survey of Library clients showed that the focus on staff has impacted positively on clients with an improvement noted in the question 'How would you rate the overall quality of service provided by the library?' (81% in 2012; 83% in 2017). The Curtin Annual Student Survey results showed that the student response to the question 'Overall I am satisfied with the library' has continued to exceed 90% in 2016 and 2017.

The positive impact of the Library Challenge work has been shown in other external measures such as the University Librarian being awarded Australia's LH Martin Institute Award for Excellence in Leadership for 2017 and a number of Library staff being invited to present in external forums nationally and internationally on Curtin Library innovations in areas such as social media, makerspaces and research data management.

While the empowerment approach of Appreciative Inquiry searches for and identifies the best in people and organisations (Cooperrider et al., 2008), a key learning from the work has been the importance of not disregarding or diminishing difficult or problematic issues. Problem-solving rigour is still valuable to help clarify less tangible aspects of organisational culture such as trust, respect, communication and conflict (Aitkin et al., 2008; Bushe & Marshak, 2016). Indeed Cooperrider (2012) has made it clear that a strength-based positive approach does not mean that problems are "avoided, ignored or denied" but rather that the balance is weighted towards "strength, opportunities, aspirations and valued results" (p. 115). The Library's change empowerment work ensured that staff felt safe to give voice to undesirable work practices that needed to change or be discarded. This began with "full and frank" focus group discussions and individual interviews following the adverse findings of the 2015 Your Voice survey and continued with the use of probing questions in the 2016 Library Challenge and supported by staff Roadshows hosted by the University Librarian. As a result, practices that were inhibiting the fulfilment of the Library's potential were thrown into light such as the poor management of internal conflicts and inconsistent performance management which are now being addressed.

From our experience in leading change in a complex environment, the participation of staff in both co-designing and implementing change has been fundamental to the successful culture transformation achieved so far. We recognise that power and resistance permeate all human interactions (Phillips, 1997; Stacey & Griffin, 2005) and if not acknowledged and addressed the power-resistance dynamic can become an elusive undercurrent that undermines efforts of work culture transformation. By inviting the participation of staff and encouraging a diversity of viewpoints from the earliest stages of the change process, those most affected are empowered to engage, shape the process and successfully embrace the challenges of a rapidly changing environment.

In our view, empowerment requires a more courageous leadership style that begins with letting go of hard controls and embracing an all-inclusive collaboration with staff in co-creating a new direction together with the actions (including designing or redesigning structures and systems) necessary for successfully embracing the future and desired ways of working.

We propose a new conceptual framing of organisational change by using the term 'change empowerment' rather than 'change management'. We believe this represents an evolution in the thinking about how organisational change and transformation should be approached. Using the language of empowerment aims to signal a shift in leadership style away from controlling change to enabling change. From this perspective, organisational change is acknowledged as dynamic, interconnected and continuous and therefore requires collaboration, engagement and inclusiveness to maximise smooth transitions and minimise the disruption that arises from low morale and commitment.

The Curtin Library is now well placed to return to incremental continuous improvement with a renewed more empowered approach. This proven approach will serve as a sound model to deal with any future disruptions that require further transformation of the Library's culture.

Conclusion

A number of leadership lessons were identified as a result of this work:

- A shift in mindset of leaders and managers from managing change to empowering change has enabled the co-creation and ownership of a powerful new vision and enabling work culture.
- A positive approach that does not diminish problems but rather focusses attention to the strengths and talents of the people within a team has proven to mitigate low morale and diminishing commitment following a period of significant disruption.
- It takes courage for leaders to enter into co-design and fully empower staff to take ownership of the vision and create the solutions for a strong work culture.

Curtin Library will continue to monitor the progress of its cultural transformation work by tracking both staff satisfaction and performance information including client feedback. Ongoing leadership development will also be essential to ensure that the Library's leadership team have the capacity and the skills required to continuously cultivate and nurture a Library culture that enables the Library's vision to be realised.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge the Curtin Library staff, the Library Challenge team and Library stakeholders – students, faculty, organisational development researchers and consultants and Curtin University senior leaders - for their contribution to and support for the culture transformation work at Curtin Library.

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