

Accepted version, July 2006 Published in Librarians on the Edge feature, *inCite*, 27 (7), 16-17.

(Northern) Irish and proud of it

[Interview by] Geraldine Barkworth

Sheila Corral is the professor and chair in Librarianship and Information Management at the Department of Information Studies, University of Sheffield, England. She was the first president of CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals) in 2002-03 and named amongst the top 10 library and information professionals in the UK. (Independent on Sunday, 2002) She's known as the British guru of staff development and strategic planning and has also been a key figure in the UK information literacy movement. She tells Geraldine Barkworth how her current role has given her a new arena for professional mentoring and change leadership.

What are 5 things you'd like us to know about you?

Strategic thinker – I am a reflective practitioner and have always been keen to share my thoughts with colleagues. I find the discipline of thinking things through for a presentation or publication helps me to advance my thinking and practice.

Change agent – Every role/job that I have had and every organisation that I have led has been different when I have left it.

Participative manager – I am wholly committed to a participative style of management and developing people so that they can make an effective contribution.

Cross-sectoral player – I have worked in public, special, national and academic libraries and actively promoted cross-sector partnerships at national and local levels.

Professional activist – I have been actively involved in professional activities throughout my career and have also tried to put something back in return.

What trends are occurring in the library and information sector of the UK?

To summarise: convergence – disintermediation – partnerships – government agenda – e-delivery. There's a blurring of professional boundaries and convergence of related services (especially in higher education), but the service mix and professional partnerships vary between and within sectors:

- academic – libraries (and archives) computing/IT, learning/learner support, MIS
- public – libraries heritage (museums, archives), lifelong learning, e-government
- government – libraries records, intranet management, communities-of-practice/KM

Our present government is obsessed with standards, targets and performance indicators, which is impacting all publicly funded LIS, but particularly public and national libraries whose priorities have been influenced by the government's social inclusion objectives. The British Library and National Libraries of Scotland and Wales have had to become more inclusive and reposition themselves as cultural attractions.

In the corporate sector, which is not so well documented in the literature, other trends include:

- changes in management arrangements – shift workers, student interns, off-shore operations, outsourced units;

- information professionals doing highly specialist sector-based or value-added research;
- more focus on procurement and regulation – negotiating licences and advising on re-use of material;
- significant amounts of time spent on managing roll-out and support of desktop electronic information products.

There's also a shortage of candidates for senior posts in the UK. Although librarians are generally more motivated by job satisfaction than money, it seems the money just isn't high enough to compensate for the demands of many senior positions.

How do you help others manage change?

As a result of my experiences, I arrived at these precepts, which are set out in my book, *Strategic Management of Information Services*:

- Explain the real reason for change and ensure that everyone understands – it is essential to distinguish between the triggers (eg arrival of a new boss, recommendations of a service review) and the root causes (reduced funding, technological developments, etc).
- Create a shared vision of the future and make it inviting to stakeholders – I try to engage people in discussion and present information and ideas in a user-friendly way, by using simplified descriptions to convey key messages in a vivid narrative or graphical form.
- Involve people at the planning stage and invite their proposals for action – it is important not to over-organise and make too many plans at the outset; use 'rolling-wave planning' and let the people concerned work out the details of the route stage by stage.
- Pay attention to individual concerns and respond to them properly and promptly – tap the staff 'rumour mill' by enlisting the help of spokespersons to find out how people really feel, so you can give reassurances or clarifications, but don't duck the difficult issues!
- Acknowledge that change takes time and accept that there are costs involved – experience has taught me that everything takes longer and costs more than you think it will; it's also vital to decide priorities between development projects and day-to-day tasks.
- Communicate early and often, and be as candid and direct as practicable – think about the timing and style of messages, as well as the content and method; it's often necessary to repeat things in different ways, but you need to avoid giving people too much stuff.
- Provide the leadership to build a culture that accepts change as the norm – I've been lucky in being able to build great top teams in my libraries, but you need leadership at all levels (particularly among middle managers and supervisors) to achieve ongoing change.

What was it like to transfer from library management to an academic role?

When I actually took up my post, I did find myself on quite a steep learning curve. I had some experience of both teaching and research, but had to develop my skills in both areas to become a credible player, particularly as I moved across at the most senior level and was expected to move into an academic leadership role fairly quickly. I had been a university senior manager for 13 years and had become used to having a professional/secretarial team to support me, but I

have no secretarial support in my new role, so I now have to build in time for low-level tasks such as filing, photocopying and arranging meetings! Another key difference is that my time is much less structured - I was used to having a sequence of meetings every day, with time in between being spent on follow-up and preparation, but a much smaller proportion of my time is formally scheduled now and activities are more open-ended (eg preparing teaching and learning activities, developing applications for research funding) so I have to give a lot more thought to how much time I spend on my various tasks.

Which personal qualities and abilities are needed for library leadership?

Leaders need vision, anticipation, energy, drive, determination, persistence and integrity. They need to be outward-looking, future-oriented, strategic thinkers, good communicators (in writing and speaking), networkers and team builders, receptive, resourceful and adaptable. They need to be good at managing and developing people – and at developing themselves.

How has a high career profile benefited you?

I have been head-hunted for jobs – I probably wouldn't have thought of moving into the academic library sector in 1990, if I hadn't been head-hunted for director of LIS at Aston University. I have been invited to participate in rewarding and stimulating groups, events and projects – so it has given me a voice, and with that, further opportunities to influence developments. It has given me an extensive network of contacts, which has informed and enriched my thinking, as well as providing friendship and support. It has enabled me to travel to places I probably wouldn't otherwise have visited – in the UK and overseas, but, unfortunately, not yet to Australia!

If you were the head of an international media campaign for the LIS profession, what would be your top 5 objectives?

There are several key messages I would want to get across – to a range of different audiences, including: educators, potential entrants to the profession, employers, politicians and the public. Too many still think of us as people who stamp books in public libraries. My key messages would be these.

- Our actual and potential roles in organising and structuring information in the digital age.
- Our important role as neutral, trusted intermediaries in connecting people to information.
- The vital role we play in preserving and conserving our documentary and cultural heritage.
- What our distinctive competencies are – and how we learn and develop our expertise.
- The wide variety of different contexts where we apply our unique knowledge and skills.

How do you ensure balance between your work and home commitments?

I think self-awareness is one of the keys to managing work-life balance. I know that unless I schedule other things in my diary (make a firm commitment to go for a walk, go to a play, meet friends, etc), work will expand to fill all the time available. Twenty years ago, I was working in central London, but not taking advantage of the wealth of theatrical productions on offer, so I set myself a target of seeing 50 plays per year - and I met it for several years (until I embarked on a part-time MBA). As I get older, I have also recognised that over-working now carries higher

health risks than before, so finding time for exercise is vital to ensuring that I have a professional future.

How do you help your staff maintain work/life balance?

By talking through workload issues and problems, helping to get things into perspective, looking for work-rounds, ways of doing things more efficiently, things that could be delegated (up, down or sideways) and generally providing support, encouragement and reassurance.

What gives you a sense of purpose and accomplishment?

I get a lot of satisfaction from finding ways to help people – students and others – make sense of things in our complex, messy world. This can be done at various levels: producing a diagram, developing a model, drafting a handout or writing a paper. Knowing that my work might still be cited in ten years time would give me a real sense of accomplishment. But, ultimately, my sense of purpose comes from a fundamental belief that libraries and information services have a continuing, pivotal role to play in society. Educating and encouraging the next generation of library professionals must be the best way to shape the future landscape.

Articles and books by Sheila Corral

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