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Nurturing Innovation

Tips for managers and administrators

by Meredith Farkas

I've spoken to library staff from libraries all over North America and have heard countless stories about innovative new services that failed. I always ask people why they think the initiative didn't work at their library and the answer has always been about the culture—whether it was because of controlling IT staff, managers who wouldn't give staff time to experiment with new technologies, or administrators who were deathly risk-averse.

While there are many things a staff member without authority can do to ensure the success of a project, institutional culture is a barrier that can only be fixed by people in charge. Here are some things managers can do to support staff in building successful and innovative services:

Encourage staff to learn and play. I've always felt that "keeping up with trends in technology and the profession" should be included in every library staff member's job description. If you want staff to come up with innovative ideas for improving the patron experience or decreasing costs, they will need time to do research and play with new technologies. Staff shouldn't have to use their own time to read professional blogs and journal literature or try out technologies.

Give staff time to experiment with potential new initiatives. Many innovative for-profit companies allow employees to devote some of their work time to pet projects—

work designed to benefit the company but outside of their specific duties. Google found that from the 20% of their employees'

time that could be dedicated to pet projects came 50% of their services, including Google News and AdSense. When staff are given time for creative thought, it's no wonder that creative solutions abound.

Keep an open mind—and an open door. Managers should work hard to create an environment where people feel comfortable sharing ideas, no matter where they are on the organizational chart. My library director started our annual planning meeting this summer by asking everyone to rapidly brainstorm ideas that no one was allowed to criticize. While we didn't implement every idea, we had much more participation and got many good ideas that people may not have shared because the idea wasn't fully fleshed out.

Develop a risk-tolerant culture. Innovation is an inherently risky process and managers have to be willing to let their staff experiment and sometimes fail. When failure happens, a good manager will make the most of it. I have had many initiatives fail and have learned far more from those experiences than if I'd simply not bothered to try. Some failures yielded insights about our patrons that led to services better



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targeted to their needs.

Don't get attached. I know first-hand that in a time of staff and budget cuts, staff time is stretched so thin

that one barely has time for the work they've always done. However, a library will not be able to innovate if management is not willing to invest time in research and development. If you want to create new services and employ new technologies for your patrons, something has to give; this might mean letting go of services your library has traditionally offered. If a program or service simply doesn't have the ROI it used to, it's worth considering whether you can discontinue it. We can't be held hostage by decisions made years ago. Our patron population has changed; we must as well.

If managers and library administrators are committed to innovation, their top priority should be bringing down whatever barriers exist that prevent their staff from innovating. Changing culture is difficult, but the consequences of not changing, especially in this economy, could be far more dire. ■

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