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<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Woo, EMW</b>
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## **Developing a learning culture for sustainable quality service**

“Look at people not as a static resource, but a dynamic, growing force.”

Drucker, Peter F. (1992, p.147)

Without much hesitation, leaders and managers of the twenty first century will agree that people is a highly valuable resource in their organizations. However, the above quote from one of the most influential management gurus hints that not many leaders and managers are able to truly appreciate human resources as a dynamic and growing force in the old days. With the relentless pressure generating from demands for change and speed in modern organizations, it is even more difficult for the management to attend to the needs of growth of their staff. Instead, to meet the challenges of everlasting change, it is not uncommon for organizations to embrace for efficient processes or technologies to accelerate speed and productivity. This quick fix approach may appear rather simplistic if we revisit the “high tech-high touch” phenomenon observed by John Naisbitt (1982) at the beginning of the technology era. Technological advancement not only increases the organizational dependence on better educated and self-directed staff to provide sensitive treatment of customers but also dawns on researchers and practitioners the need for a completely new style of management.

In the course of their recent global research on the relationship between speed and business results, Davis, Frechette and Boswell (2010) confirmed that cultivating experience helps accelerate everyday execution and leads to positive business outcomes. They found that “speed in organizations depends on pace, process, and people, but it’s the people factors that turn out to be the most powerful accelerator—or brake” (p.21) and one of the factors differentiating faster companies from slower companies is “[l]eaders who learn and improve from experience continuously”(p.131). Obviously, people is a more critical factor than technologies and process re-engineering in pursuing higher speed and productivity.

In search of a new direction leading to sustainable development of a quality workforce and organization, Peter Senge at MIT (1990) started to advocate the notion of learning organization which is defined by him as “a group of people continually enhancing their capacity to create what they want to create”. Inspired by Senge, Kline and Saunders (1998) developed a ten step process for building a learning organization. Within the model of Senge, Giesecke and McNeil (2004) expound that a learning organization is:

“[S]killed at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights. Without accompanying changes in the way that work gets done, only the potential for improvement exists. Learning organizations translate new knowledge into new ways of behaving... In a learning organization, learning takes place at the individual, group, and organizational levels.” (p.55)

Though the learning organization model may look intimidating to some leaders and managers “ for the ways it demands people to shift their fundamental beliefs about organizations and management from more mechanistic and rigid approaches to more humane and flexible ones” (Webber, 1999), it did attract attention from many organizations including libraries that would like to renew and transform their commitment to quality service. Some libraries such as the University of Maryland Libraries (Baughman and Hubbard, 2001), the North Suburban Public Library System of Chicago (Hayes, Sullivan and Baaske, 1999) and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries (Giesecke and McNeil, 2004) have implemented the learning organization model and shared their successful experience.

Realizing that continuous learning is the foundation of continuous improvement for an organization, the University of Hong Kong Libraries started to develop a learning culture in the past decade and kept on monitoring the progress and outcome via various channels over the years. While the establishment of effective mechanisms and measures are very important in promoting a learning culture, our experience concludes that the genuine appreciation of this notion and the unremitting support from the leaders and managers prove to be the most important incentive to keep the passion of learning running high among staff members.

### **Changing the culture**

As suggested by Kline and Saunders (p.44), HKUL started the process of building a learning culture by *knowing what everyone thinks about the culture they work in*. Two ad-hoc committees with members from professional librarians and general library staff were set up respectively in 2001. Surveys and open meetings were conducted by the two groups in 2001 to find out what did staff think about staff development in HKUL. Reports from both committees indicated that staff members were very concerned about professional development and look forward to

more training opportunities. A number of recommendations were made to the management and many of them were adopted for trial and implementation in the following years (see Figure A).

Major Recommendations from Professional Librarians	Major Recommendations from General Library Staff
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Revise staff development policy</li> <li>2. Staff Development Committee(s)</li> <li>3. New staff orientation</li> <li>4. Training programs</li> <li>5. Learn about other parts of the library system</li> <li>6. Staff appraisal for training needs</li> <li>7. Effective communication and equal opportunities for training</li> <li>8. Journal routing</li> <li>9. Library association membership</li> <li>10. Annual award for best contribution</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Training support in terms of funding, time and work schedule</li> <li>2. Programmes suiting the wide range of staff needs</li> <li>3. Visits to other libraries</li> <li>4. Encouragement from management to get further training</li> <li>5. Communication about training opportunities</li> <li>6. Representation of members in staff development committee from all parts of the library system</li> </ol>

Figure A: Recommendations adopted from the HKUL ad-hoc committees for staff development

A staff development advisory committee was set up in early 2002 and a part-time staff development officer was appointed to help coordinate relevant programmes and activities with secretarial and clerical support from the library administration. Members of the committee are appointed from various ranks and divisions every two years to ensure that different needs and views are taken care of. A staff development fund is allocated at the beginning of each financial year to carry out the annual programmes designed by the committee. While senior management will be consulted on major activities from time to time, committee members are encouraged to take responsibility for what they think and what they do, forming a two-way street as described in step one of the Kline and Saunders model.

To start the change process, we have to take the second step, i.e. *beginning to reframe the negatives by developing a positive attitude among staff*. To energize meeting participants, the tool of “Good and New” (Kline and Saunders, p.82) was used. Everybody would take a turn recounting something good recently at work or in life at the beginning of each meeting. Once the habit is shared, people will not be easily overcome by negative experience or difficult situations. Gradually, “Good and New” was no longer a standard item at our meetings but staff have learnt how

important to keep our spirit positive in a team. In fact, positive attitude and the reframing technique have turned out to be popular themes in some of our development and training activities.

Encouraging positive thoughts is an important step to take, *making the workplace safe for thinking* is another, if not more, crucial step to tap on the thinking capacity of our staff. Once the Pandora box for thoughts is located, we must keep it open to allow free flow of ideas. In the reports of the two committees mentioned above, HKUL management also identified a craving for more open and effective communication. To help staff air their views in a friendly environment without fear or pressure, a staff relations committee was formed with members from various grades and teams. The membership has been evolved over the years from appointment by the management and nomination among fellow staff at the beginning to total election in recent years. Training was offered to the members by an external expert on how to serve as a capable staff representative. Apart from the traditional channels such as memo, circulars, emails, meetings and notice boards, some new ways have been introduced to improve communication between staff and the management. For example, staff forums are held each year to share major developments and issues of the libraries; an intranet is jointly maintained by various divisions to provide up-to-date information and resources for all staff. In early 2010, a blog was created on a trial basis by the staff relations committee for posting of library news and activities organized by that committee.

Another communication channel between staff and the management is participation of the committee chairs in meetings and decision making of the management teams. Through discussion of library-wide policies and operations, it is expected that two-way communication can be established between staff and the management more efficiently and effectively. In the first instance, the two chairs can help to bring important plans and issues of the libraries to the attention of their own committee. On the other hand, committee members can also voice out their ideas and concern to the management via their chairs. The interaction is captured in meeting minutes to be distributed to all library staff for information. Some good learning experience can be cultivated if the above mechanism is well utilized by both the staff and management:

1. The committee chairs and members can directly or indirectly take part in decision making together with the management, thus assuming certain level of responsibilities for what they think and advocating a learning culture in which good opinions will be respected;

2. The transparency of information will facilitate identification and discussion of problems and suggestions at different levels. All the parties concerned will have to put their “problem-solving hats on all the time” (Kline and Saunders, p.102) and look for continuous improvements in an open environment;
3. Sharing of good practice or brainstorming of new ideas can facilitate knowledge exchange and nurture staff confidence for future problem solving;
4. For issues that cannot be resolved with instant measures, frontline staff will learn that those issues are already on the agenda and they can advise customers accordingly to reduce dissatisfaction.

Reacting to the competitive and volatile global environment will involve a certain level of risk taking, not to mention investing resources for the future. The risk taking level of library leaders today is relatively high given that their decision making is closely related to ever-evolving information technology. “It’s through risk-taking itself that we hone the skills and judgment required to become ever more seasoned risk-takers” (Kline and Saunders, p.116). In *building up a culture that support risk-taking* and learning from risks, a major endeavour in HKUL is to involve staff in annual strategic planning through brainstorming sessions and annual retreats. All staff will be invited to participate in brainstorming sessions to contribute ideas for improvement or innovation before annual library retreats.

Participants nominated from each division and team will glean through all the ideas at the retreats and select appropriate new initiatives for implementation. Brainstorming sessions are designed to collect bold ideas no matter they are very little or big. All the ideas brainstormed will be protected until they are presented at the selection process. Retreat participants will be responsible for screening the ideas based on their strengths and weaknesses in achieving the vision and goals of the Libraries. After the retreats, managerial permission will be granted once it is ensured that the organization has the capability to embark on the selected projects, i.e. taking the anticipated risk. During the formation of project teams, expertise will be drawn from different sections and ranks as far as possible. This will not only increase the chances of success, but also help to foster cross-learning and build up risk-taking skills among staff of different levels. Of course, participants must be equipped with appropriate resources and project management skills to assist them sail through the challenges ahead. Last but not least, rewarding the good ideas and efforts as well as allowing for mistakes are strategic ways to help staff feel safe in

taking moderate risks in an organization that values learning.

### **From strategic human resource management to a learning organization**

The learning organization model can be viewed as a manifestation of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) in the successful experiments of some libraries and “thoughtful change management can help organizations achieve more than was possible before crisis and can help them do so in ways better aligned with their core values”(Smith, 2006). Despite the different perspectives addressed by SHRM, learning organization and change management, there is obviously a close relationship between these management concepts as demonstrated in their application in the real world.

Beginning in the 1990s, SHRM has gradually been promoted and adopted in many private and public organizations. Pynes (2004) views SHRM as “the implementation of human resources activities, policies, and practices to make the necessary ongoing changes to support or improve the agency’s operational and strategic objectives”. In the public setting, Klingner and Nalbandian (1998) define SHRM as “the purposeful resolution of human resource administration and policy issues so as to enhance a public agency’s ability to accomplish its mission. It requires an *understanding* of how organizational human resource management functions relate to one another and to their environment context, a *vision* of the strategic importance of human resources, and a *commitment* on the part of elected officials, personnel managers, supervisors, and employees to work for change.”

In HKUL, the staff development programmes are formulated with SHRM and learning organization in mind. The annual cycle of programme planning, implementation and assessment is interwoven with elements drawn from these two concepts. When the staff development committee conducts needs analysis at the beginning of a year, members will be provided with data of staff development needs extracted from performance review reports of individual staff. As all assessors are required to discuss staff development needs of their assessees in a specific section of the reports, analysis of these data will offer valuable guidance in identifying and prioritizing staff development activities given the relevant budget allocated each year. Once the themes are determined, further comments from supervisors and staff will be gauged by means of focus group meetings to ensure that the contents and format are appropriate. For activities to be re-organized due to over-subscription or favorable feedback from participants, the staff development committee will review

the whole activity and recommend further improvement.

While internal assessment can offer the perspectives of management and staff, feedback from our users will provide libraries a more holistic view and stimulate a pressing need for staff development. One typical example in HKUL is a series of self-initiated customer services workshops organized between 2006 and 2007. Since 2004, the responses to a biannual user survey were tracked in order to identify improvements, or otherwise, in users' perceptions of staff performance in terms of their customer service. In 2005, during one of the Libraries annual planning retreats, an operational priority (strategic plan objective) was created to "develop an internal staff training programme with an emphasis on customer service." (Sidorko and Woo, 2008). This completely home grown programme was well received by attendees and has laid the seeds for further adoption of in-house facilitators/trainers. Moreover, the user survey results in 2008 seem to indicate that improvements in users' perceptions of staff performance have significantly improved following the workshops (Appendix 1).

The development of knowledge management and exchange, i.e. *helping people become resources for each other*, is a major step in the development of our learning culture. Through exploring and developing the talents of staff, a tremendously enriching experience will be created for both the organization and the individuals who comprise it (Kline and Saunders, p.134). After the successful launching of a training programme by in-house facilitators/trainers, further collaboration among library units and external parties was brought to fruition. As one of the 2009/10 operational priorities, a team comprising of an academic from the Faculty of Education and staff members from different divisions such as Information Literacy and Knowledge Management, Reference, Collection Development and Systems organized a 7-week course to teach library staff Web 2.0 techniques to improve teaching and learning. On the blogs developed as one of the final assignments for this course, almost all participating staff indicated that the course and trainers not only taught them skills in utilizing the tools but also helped to remove their fears in Web 2.0 and stimulate their interest in learning new internet skills in future. The course also boosted up the confidence of our trainers and aroused a sense of satisfaction in their working life.

In the same vein, the staff development committee started organizing a series of sharing sessions during lunch time by divisions and individual staff enhance communication and learning in early 2010. The topics range from reports on major



conferences and institutional visits to project updates, introduction of the works in different library divisions and application of latest technology or special knowledge. The sessions are not confined to presentations by staff speakers but interactive exchange on issues of interest or concern between presenters and audience. To cater for the needs of staff working at off-campus locations and advocate knowledge management, all the sessions are recorded and uploaded to the staff intranet for sharing. The response is very encouraging as reflected by the stable number of participants and positive feedback from staff. Hopefully, the sharing sessions will become an on-going staff development programme with richer contents and more extensive participation.

In a mature learning organization, assigned groups or personnel are not and should not be the only agent to promote learning. A culture must be created to allow learning opportunity sprout in every corner of the workplace. Both the management and staff can explore and advocate learning opportunities by all means. For instance, introduction of new procedures and workflow, facilities and equipment is just an opportune timing for individual or group learning. When HKUL purchased a new document management system in early 2010, all divisions were invited to review their filing systems and practices to pave way for the new configurations to be adopted for managing documents at various physical locations and in a larger variety of formats. Like many other projects, there are resource limitations that the participants must overcome. With the help of our University Record Archivist and a temporary staff with rich experience in document management systems, participants in the first phase of the project thoroughly analyzed the old record keeping structure and explore the feasibility to re-align the directories and folders according to the practice recommended by the University Record Archivist. Despite the many challenges in the process of revamping the old system, much learning experience in record keeping, communication and collaboration has been nurtured among participants. The experience will help individuals and the organization to further improve its efficiency in the long run.

The deepest purpose of the first five steps of Kline and Saunders's model is to remove barriers to learning, and to unleash the hidden learning potential of all employees, teams, and the organization. The next step is to *put learning power to work*. As pointed out by the above authors, one of the biggest challenge of how to bridge the application gap, i.e. the gap between what staff learn and how they apply (Kline and Saunders, p.172). HKUL has been trying to overcome this obstacle ever since we introduced our staff development programmes. During the evaluation of

our workshops organized in the early years, many participants had expressed difficulty in applying the concepts and skills they learnt. In search of relevant, quick and powerful learning experience, efforts were made to deliver the training in the dramatic and experiential way. Instead of the traditional lectures, we put more emphasis on activities that can stimulate emotional experience such as role play, case discussion and inspirational games. The effectiveness of this approach has been repeatedly demonstrated by the more positive feedback of participants on relevant activities as compared to traditional lecture.

Nevertheless, we are fully aware that one size does not fit all in training. The staff development committee therefore always explores for new ways to suit the different learning modes and needs of individual staff. Apart from one-off workshops or courses held by the University or the Libraries, HKUL staff can also attend a wide variety of development activities including:

- Staff exchange programmes with other libraries;
- Local and international library conferences and seminars;
- Visits to local and overseas libraries and information institutions;
- Formal programmes in library studies or a relevant subject discipline;
- Talks and sharing sessions by library experts or internal staff;
- Online training on library-related competences offered by prestigious institutions such as the WebJunction;
- Circulation of library journals, newsletters and literature;
- Use of training kits and videos.

While professional leave and financial assistance will be provided to activities that are job-related or beneficial to the professional development of individual staff, other forms of incentive and motivation must also be offered to staff and supervisors in view of the ever-increasing competition for staff time between operational needs and staff development. The principle is to strike a good balance between the needs and interests of all the parties involved. To optimize the value of our staff development programmes as well as the return on investment, training topics and contents have to tie in with the strategic business needs of our University and the Libraries as mentioned earlier in this paper. Appropriate and flexible timing is another essential factor in soliciting support from division heads and individual staff. Short modular courses to be held in low business seasons can usually fit in the busy schedule of participants working in the front line and will most probably gain the support from supervisors. Some other incentives offered in HKUL include recognition in terms of better rating and reward steps in performance reviews. Last

but not least, good communication and active promotion of training opportunities is also a critical element in strategic staff development. To avoid wastage of training resources, programme details including the objectives, contents and the target participants must be communicated to all the eligible staff clearly and timely.

In traditional training, the measurement of learning outcome is usually confined to one-off course evaluation done by the participants. Actually, follow through of what is learnt is almost as important as the stage of organizing the activities. A good example in HKUL is the occupational safety and health training. Both the University and the Libraries coordinate refresher training to employees on first aid, fire safety, manual handling and computer ergonomics. On top of the training, the Libraries started organizing regular meetings between safety representatives from all divisions to discuss post-training support needed in the office so that that the classroom learning can be practiced in the workplace. On the other hand, effective communication between safety representatives and the management can help to identify good practices and areas for further improvement, enabling continuous learning for all the parties concerned.

Strategic staff development should incorporate consolidation of feedback from everyone who is affected by training to ensure sustainable improvement of library service. As mentioned earlier, results of the user surveys and staff performance review in HKUL have been tracked over the past few years to find out whether there is any improvement on services and the overall employee performance. Other measurable elements may include staff turnover rate, successful rate of internal candidates in open recruitment exercises and so forth. Of course, there are some beneficial outcomes of training programmes such as internal networking, knowledge sharing and increased staff morale. However, these areas are comparatively more difficult to measure.

Taking into account the focus of this paper on staff development, further discussion on the remaining four steps mentioned in Kline and Saunders's model about the evolution of a learning organization, namely *map out the vision, bring the vision to life, connect the systems and get the show on the road*, will be not pursued here. Nevertheless, good vision setting, team building, internalization and execution of the learning energy required in those steps are indispensable in HKUL as well as in any modern organizations aspiring for continuous learning and a competitive edge in their industry. In fact, the last step of getting the show on the road is the most challenging part of the model in the case of HKUL.

## **Get ready for another decade of challenges**

2011 will be a very exciting year for HKUL as both the University of Hong Kong and the libraries will be celebrating its centennial. The two major developments, i.e. the new Centennial Campus and the new curriculum reform will definitely bring along many unprecedented challenges in service delivery. At the same time, a learning commons will also be established in the Main Library to cope with the changing needs of our users. After reviewing the major customer service ratings in our 2009 user survey (see Appendix 1), one will realize that it is not easy to maintain a high performance level. In-depth analysis of the survey results must be followed with effective strategic plans. To carry on our journey towards sustainable quality service, continuous improvement will have to be achieved by means of active learning and strategic human resources management. The following areas will justify more attention in the staff development of HKUL in the coming years:

- Enhancing the capacity of managers and supervisors to observe talents in others. With the increasing cost of human resources in developing or developed economies and the comparatively more rigid appointment structure in public organizations, we must develop this skill of great value in the workplace and optimize the talents of our staff;
- Putting more emphasis on the development of middle management and frontline supervisors as they are expected to play a very critical role as communicators, teachers, coaches, mentors, cultivators and facilitators in a learning organization;
- Identifying more learning leaders among different levels of staff (Kline and Saunders, p.165). Such a network will become a solid foundation for continuous learning and organizational change in preparation of the many challenges mentioned above;
- Improving induction and orientation for new staff, especially the part-timers and outsourced staff taking into account their growing number in modern libraries and their vulnerability to inferior learning opportunities;
- Incorporating the reflective learning process as a core theme in personal development. Understanding of oneself is the intrapersonal intelligence that can produce the most valuable jumps in learning (Kline and Saunders, p.176). Conscious practice, openness, reflection in action and experimentation should be developed as the key competences to help

- capture experience (Davis, Frechette and Boswell, p.143) ; and
- Promoting staff engagement to strengthen the positive emotional attachment to their job, colleagues and organization. The more committed to their work environment, the stronger passion the staff will develop in workplace learning.

### **Life-long organizational learning for sustainable quality service**

Looking back into almost a decade of efforts in building a learning culture in HKUL, the experience itself is almost as valuable as the outcome we witnessed. Although some critics like Lucas (1999) have identified some limitations to the learning organization model, arguments such as “passion is even more fundamental than the learning organization, because it is passion that gives us the driving reason to learn and to apply our new knowledge effectively” do not deny the value of concept in organizational change and effectiveness. Smith (2006) even points out that the “learning organization model is provocative and promising for librarianship theoretically” as “in the world of librarianship in which the facilitation and application of knowledge is the driving passion, and in which a profound concern with the democratic and humane distribution and uses of knowledge is the goal”.

It has become a strategic issue of survival when we talked about staff development these days. Life-long learning should not only be viewed as a matter of individual progression but also a priority item on the business agenda of any organizations. Having that said, both the management and staff should be fully aware of the practical advice from experts for developing a learning culture:

- Sufficient time and resources must be allowed for the culture to take root and flourish. Success is usually built up by subtle changes initiated by small groups that gradually spread over the whole organization. Patience and a positive attitude are the very critical nutrients a learning environment;
- Leaders have to model, mentor, and guide the kind of culture change they need to create while staff members must take responsibility in organization operation and self development. Everybody should exhibit a sense of organizational accountability;
- Leaders or teachers should provide learners with a balance of challenge and support so that the latter will be energized for continuous growth.

Leaders should communicate clearly to staff the potential to be fulfilled and the targets to be reached, and help the staff to get there by giving them demand, care and support. (Davis, Frechette and Boswell, p. 135-137).

With long lasting passion and a sense of creativity, learning opportunities can be cultivated and harnessed everywhere in our libraries.

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