



Editorial Statement

“The More Things Change. . .”

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Do you need to read another column about change in academic libraries? Can one be written that is not a hackneyed cliché-ridden rehash? You are forewarned that the answer to both questions is a resounding “maybe!” I want to establish a premise that reverses an old aphorism, arguing that “the more things change, the less they are the same” for our libraries. When I began studies at the School of Information and Library Science in Chapel Hill nearly three decades ago, the kind of library organization I prepared to work in was fundamentally different from the one I find myself in today. This is because the external environment has stimulated change, not because we have actively sought it—the change has been largely reactive. The primary forces of change are easy to recognize and they are not of our making—shifts in pedagogy and research; the transformational impact of networked information technology; a revolution in scholarly information and in the intellectual property regime; and the ever-present restraint of budget, both inputs and outputs.

I do not lament the fact that we are principally reactive and not proactive in our response, because I do not think it can be otherwise, although I do believe we can be a bit more anticipatory in responding. Institutions under challenge, as I believe all libraries are, must find ways to mobilize to respond. To take an example, the U.S. Department of Defense is an organization whose core mission is, by definition, challenge. It is more fortunate than libraries in one respect—it must only decide whether to fight one or two major wars at a time. It does not even need to know who the enemy might be. Libraries are not so lucky—we do not know what our wars may be nor whom we shall fight until we face them. Thus, our strategy must be to organize to respond rapidly to whatever war might occur. Not to stretch this metaphor to the breaking point, another way to put it is that we must mobilize continuously to face the external challenges. However, I think one thing remains unchanged—our core mission—delivering access to the world of scholarly information to support learning in the classroom and the discovery of new knowledge and invention. That is the foundation on which we should build organizational strategy. This is easy to say but hard to do.

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When organizations lose sight of their purpose, they lose their way completely. However, failure can arise from less dramatic causes than forgetting what we are about. In *Reframing Organizations*, Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal suggest several other dynamics that cause organizational failure. When organizations lose touch with their customers needs, they lose market position.¹

No less so libraries that fail to stay close to the needs of their faculty and students. Historically, libraries have used many methods to plumb faculty and student opinion to assess effectiveness. Recently we have begun exploiting the advanced tools of social science research with projects like LibQual+.²

When organizations lose touch with their employees, they lose the opportunity to meet and to solve challenges. It is this notion around which much modern organizational development theory is developed. Finally, when managers “do not know what to do, they do more of what they know.”³

These last two failure points are closely allied, because an effective manager realizes that no one individual can have the ideas, strategies, and insights to make an organization successful, and turns to others to enrich decisions.

What does this suggest about what must be done? To return to the earlier metaphor—it calls for total mobilization. The management literature to which we so often look for guidance fundamentally emphasizes the role of managers and leadership. As important as I think these are, I also believe the external challenges to academic libraries are so great that to achieve great success in meeting them means the intelligence, energy and commitment of all staff must be mobilized to find our way. In effect, every staff member must, in some measure, become a manager and a leader—and the organization must treat them as though they have a brain in their head. I am not suggesting a lock-step mentality or a monolithic organizational vision is desirable—or, for that matter, achievable. I am suggesting that there is afoot in academic libraries what may be called an “organizational development movement” that has as its goal the creation of the “learning organization.” In my view, this is an encouraging sign that we have recognized the only way to be successful in the current environment. Peter Vaill’s *Learning as a Way of Being* perhaps says it best:

The learning organization is a different kind of social system than that envisioned by the dominant concept of organizational theory. . . . The learning organization is not grudgingly and creakily lurching from one stable state to the next. . . . [It] has achieved a new kind of internal structure and process marked by imaginative flexibility of style in its leadership and by empowered contributions from its membership. It is constituted to learn and grow and change—as opposed to traditional bureaucratic models constituted to be stable and predictable in their operation, to hold the line and not change.⁴

However, venturing down this path is not for the faint of heart because “deep change” (as the term is used by Robert E. Quinn) is a long term effort requiring a significant amount of risk taking and tenacity. It must occur at both the personal and organizational level.



Deep change differs from incremental change in that it requires new ways of thinking and behaving. It is change that is major in scope, discontinuous with the past and generally irreversible. The deep change effort distorts existing patterns of action and involves risk taking. Deep change means surrendering control.⁵

We may not think much about it, but the externally driven change we are facing is part of the larger “global economy.” If this were true in only one respect—the globalization of publishing—I think that would be sufficient for us to adopt strategies used by global companies for remaining competitive. There are many institutional structures through which libraries act collectively in the national and international environment—ALA and its Divisions, ARL, OCLC, ICOLC to name a few. But I believe it is equally essential to work locally and to transform our organizations. Who will be responsible for the successful library organization in this environment?

The world of managers and administrators is a world of messes: complexity, ambiguity, value dilemmas, political pressures, and multiple constituencies. For managers whose images blind them to this messy reality, it is a world of frustration and failure. For those with the better theories and the capacity to use their theories with skill and grace, it is a world of excitement and possibility.⁶

I have only one quibble with this statement—that the word “organizations” should be substituted for “managers.” In the end we must all learn together how to deal with the “complexity, ambiguity, value dilemmas, political pressures, multiple constituencies.” Recently, the University of Maryland Libraries have charted a course for change that emphasizes this fact. I offer the development of our “Learning Curriculum” not as an exemplar, but as an example of how a library might respond to the challenge of continuous change.⁷

Our best hope of success is the mobilization of all staff through continuous learning and engagement in organizational problem solving to meet the challenge of continuous change.

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Notes

1. Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers: 1997, second edition), 3–4.
2. See LibQual+ General FAQ, available: <<http://www.arl.org/libqual/geninfo/faqgen.html>> [July 21, 2001].
3. Bolman, 5–6.
4. Peter B. Vaill, *Learning as a way of Being: Strategies for Survival in a World of Permanent White Water* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers: 1996), 52–53.
5. Robert E. Quinn, *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers: 1996), 3.
6. Bolman, p. 34.
7. See, for instance, <http://www.lib.umd.edu/UMCP/PUB/working_paper_3.html> [July 21, 2001]; and <<http://www.lib.umd.edu/PUB/learning/html>>.