# Leadership and Empowerment: Assets or Liabilities? The University of Trieste Library System: An Exploratory Case Study

Research proposal

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## 1. *Problem statement*

- **Introduction**

Leadership and empowerment can be either strategic assets or heavy liabilities for a University Library System that strives to grow and compete in a changing environment. It depends on the meanings people give to these concepts and on the interactions between them. It seems interesting to explore leadership and empowerment in a real-life context where local subcultures persist.

- **Background**

The University of Trieste is a medium-sized institution which was established by royal decree in 1924.

The University of Trieste Library System (hence LS) was first set up in 1995; it has great autonomy, it is made up of 11 branch libraries and is coordinated by a chief librarian. Its aim is to manage all its resources (budget and staff) more efficiently and to monitor quality standards by superintending Faculty and Department libraries. It is the system manager of the local hub of the National Library Service and therefore cooperates with a wide range of libraries within the region.

- **The organization chart**

The LS organization chart mirrors the University organizational structure. It is a divisional system, based on a role culture, wherein the LS corresponds to a Department - supervised by a Coordinator - with several sub-units corresponding to the different branch libraries – headed by directors (whose position power varies according to local subcultures). There are few centralized services, though, which report directly to the Coordinator, namely Administration & Accounting, Computing Services, the Local Hub of the National Library Service, and In-service Training, User Education & Communication.

- **Weaknesses of the LS**

Before the implementation of the LS, local libraries worked independently of each other but were subject to the fancies and whims of the academic staff. Now branch libraries still have their own subcultures and priorities are set according to the local traditions and values.

As a result, central policies are sometimes applied unwillingly and grudgingly, and tensions arise between different directors and between directors and the Coordinator. There is no shared vision and no real sense of ownership. A few attempts at team working have failed; others are disempowered by lack of recognition. Focal points are communication and knowledge management

within the organization. The LS is user-oriented, but there is no clear picture of the strategies to be applied.

- **Managing change in academic libraries**

The pace of change within libraries has been escalating following upon the relentless technological innovations and social transformations. The University of Trieste LS has consequently implemented ICT to automate all its functions and to facilitate communication flows. However the standard of services is uneven in branch libraries, owing to the different local subcultures and organizational climates and to the persistence of position power. The coordinator and a few directors try conversely to steer the LS to a new course by advocating a shared vision of its future.

- **The learning organization**

There is a flourishing literature on the management of change in academic libraries. One of the most challenging and stimulating models to *"internalize change"* is the learning organization (Worrell, 1995, 356). The change effort however should not be driven by authority (Senge, 1996), but by learning, as libraries should become "*an oasis for continuous learning*" (Riggs, 1997a).

The literature shows that in the United States the learning organization has provided academic libraries with a viable framework for experimenting new solutions and restructuring their organizations. It is commonly believed that flattened hierarchies, cross-functional teams and organizational learning facilitate libraries to respond more effectively to change. Decisions have to be made at the lowest possible level and problems have to be solved by those who are directly involved (Worrell, 1995; Bender, 1997; Riggs, 1997b; Dworaczyk, 2002). Structures become then more flexible and adaptive because *"chains of command are short"* (Rowley, 2000, 10).

Communication is paramount, as the staff are entitled to "*adequate emotional support and the necessary training to adjust to new work arrangements*" (Worrell, 1995, 356), "*common understanding of goals*", and assurance about what "*empowerment means*" (Bender, 1997, 21).

- **Weaknesses of the model**

One of the main sources of conflict and misunderstanding seems to be the need for strong leadership on the one hand and the need for truly empowered teams on the other. If an organization wants to grow and develop it is basic to be clear about who decides what and what can be delegated to whom and how. Leadership and empowerment become two faces of the same coin if the vision is shared by leaders and subordinates. The following concerns arise:

- ➢ leaders must be aware of their leadership style
- ➢ staff must be sure about what empowerment means (Bender, 1997, 21).

On the other hand,

➢ leaders may be *"reluctant to yield control"*

➢ *"employees may have difficulty in working more independently"* (Worrell, 1995, 356).

- **Leadership and empowerment**

The opinions of accredited scholars on the definitions and interrelations of leadership and empowerment differ to a great extent, and remain highly controversial:

> *"Change has to start at the top because otherwise defensive senior managers are likely to disown any transformation in reasoning patterns coming from below." (Argyris, 1991, 106)*

> *"Isn't it odd that we should seek to bring about less hierarchical and authoritarian organizational cultures through recourse to hierarchical authority?" (Senge, 1996).*

It is necessary to explain and understand not just the single concepts but the combination of leadership and empowerment, namely how to reconcile empowerment with strategic leadership, or else how to disperse power on the one hand while taking it up on the other.

> *"Every library staff member is expected to be a leader at times and a follower at other times…" (Baughman & Hubbard, 2001)*

The literature review has helped to develop more insightful questions about the topic chosen for this research proposal and to find out that it has never been thoroughly investigated in studies devoted to library management in Italy.

- **Research aims**
    - ➢ To assess the level of maturity of our organization
    - ➢ To assess the possibility of applying some of the learning organization principles to our LS
    - ➢ To provide insight for more effective training and knowledge management
    - ➢ To overcome local subcultures

- **Research objectives**
    - ➢ To investigate the leadership and followership style of a purposeful sample of our staff (library directors and subordinates) within a purposive sample of our libraries

- ➢ To examine the diverse perceptions about what leadership and empowerment are about
- ➢ To compare the perceptions of leaders with the perceptions of subordinates and vice versa
- ➢ To investigate the possible relationships between training and knowledge management on the one hand and leadership and empowerment on the other

- **Research questions**
  - ➢ How can leaders be encouraged and/or helped to hand over part of their power and how can subordinates be encouraged and/or helped to become more independent?
  - ➢ What are the relationships between leadership and empowerment on the one hand and training and knowledge management on the other?
  - ➢ Which should be the guiding principles for more effective training and knowledge management in this respect?

## 2. *The research process*

- **The researcher**

The researcher is strongly motivated to discover the meanings behind the actions and behaviours observed. Gaining access will be easy because the researcher belongs to the organization and is responsible for in-service training, user education and communication. She should be able to obtain the confidence and trust of the inquired having interviewed them in the past to assess their training needs.

The comprehension of the case is enhanced when the researcher develops a relationship of empathy with the subjects under analysis, who are encouraged to take up an active role and to participate both directly and creatively.

- **Qualitative research**

The object of this research is the culture of the organization, namely

- ➢ tacit knowledge and rules
- ➢ communication, interpersonal relations, and decision-making
- ➢ shared rituals and symbols
- ➢ the individual considered as a whole (Corbetta, 2003b, 24; 75),

i.e. soft qualitative data.

This research will be a construction of the researcher and the research participants and will be person-centred and case-based:

> *"Qualitative research attempts to understand meanings that people give to their deeds or to social phenomena… researchers see people from the inside … Realities cannot be studied in pieces (for example, as variables) but only holistically and in context."*
> *(Oka & Shaw, 2000).*

Qualitative research entails a low level of formalization and no standard procedures. Researchers consequently need to unlock their imagination to attain the essence of qualitative research, i.e flexibility, by using as many strategies as deemed necessary (Oka & Shaw, 2000). Qualitative research *"get[s] under the skin"* of an organization and explores the *"complexities"* of *"informal reality" "in context"* (Gillham, 2000, 11).

Neither definitive concepts nor predetermined hypotheses are used; the research starts from a *"sensitizing concept"* (Blumer, quoted in Corbetta, 2003a, 65), which will be defined both operationally and theoretically during the research.

- **The research design**

Choosing the research strategy which best suits the research questions, aims and objectives is a critical success factor (Yin, 2003, 3). Methods however are embedded in theoretical perspectives and it is paramount to be clear about the research paradigms before starting the research process:

> *"Questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm… The methodological question cannot be reduced to a question of methods; methods must be fitted to a predetermined methodology … Differences in paradigm assumptions cannot be dismissed as mere "philosophical differences"… [as they] have important consequences for the practical conduct of inquiry, as well as for the interpretation of findings and policy choices." (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, 105; 108; 112)*

Qualitative research is a dynamic process which has to be loose enough to adapt to the emergence of data (Corbetta, 2003a, 70), with no clear cut distinction between theory and empirical results (Corbetta, 2003b, 11). The rationales behind this research are listed below, ordered logically from the epistemological level to operational tools.

I. **Constructivism**

Reality can be known only through the meanings that people give to it and this implies that there are multiple, socially constructed realities to be explored (Corbetta, 2003a, 39). Empowerment specifically takes on multiple forms across people, is contextually embedded and shifts over time, so a constructivist approach to inquiry is recommended in order to account for the multiplicity and dynamism of this concept (Foster-Fishman, 1998, 509). The same, according to the researcher, applies to the concept of leadership.

## II. Interpretivism

This research focuses on *"intentional, meaningful behaviour that is by definition historically, socially and culturally relative"* (Schwandt, 1994, 130). The interpretivistic paradigm implies an open and interactive relationship between theory and research. The aim is to understand (Verstehen) the viewpoint of the subject under study without being too much influenced by preconceived notions (Corbetta, 2003a, 33).

## III. Grounded theory

This methodology develops theory that is *"grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed"* and defines the strategies that lie behind the choice of methods. There is a *"continuous interplay between analysis and data collection"* that sheds light into the *"multiple perspectives"* of the actors involved. Criteria for achieving *"conceptual density"*, *"variation"* and *"integration"* are provided (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, passim).

## IV. Exploratory case studies

According to Yin, case studies are the method to be chosen when research questions begin with a "how", such as the main research question in this study. Moreover case studies are recommended when contemporary events are investigated in a real-life context, where relevant behaviours cannot possibly be manipulated by the researcher and the boundaries between phenomenon and context not clearly defined. This case study is exploratory because it does not start from stated propositions (Yin, 2003, 12; 22) and it is designed as an embedded, single case-study. The main unit of analysis is the LS, but attention is also given to subunits (i.e. branch libraries) (Yin, 2003, 42-43).

- **Sampling**

The researcher defines the units of analysis and the boundaries of the case. Cases are chosen as long as they facilitate the comprehension process and according to the theoretical importance that

concepts take on as the research process develops aiming at *"theoretical saturation"* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 158).

One of the possible strategies is *"intensity sampling"*, that is to choose *"information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely"* (Patton, quoted in Oka & Shaw, 2000). The choice of cases is strongly connected to the trustworthiness of *"analytic induction"* (Oka & Shaw, 2000).

- **Data collection**

Multiple sources of evidence will be used in order to develop *"converging lines of inquiry"* and *"triangulation"* of data (Yin, 2003, 98), and namely:

➤ a combination of interviews ranging from informal conversations to semi-structured interviews, where the interview schedules allow some level of ownership to interviewees

➤ direct and unobtrusive onlooker observation of the meetings of the LS committee to study group dynamics[1]

➤ documentary information (organization chart, statute, web site etc.).

Moreover,

➤ the LS coordinator will be the key informant and will provide her own insight and considered opinions

➤ a research diary or reflexive journal will help to maintain a *"chain of evidence"* (Yin, 2003, 105)

➤ a case database will also be kept for external inspection.

Ethical issues will be dealt with conscientiously; confidentiality and not mere anonymity will be assured and informed consent will be gained from the participants.

A pilot case study will be held within the library deemed to be the most convenient to *"develop relevant lines of questions"* (Yin, 2003, 79).

- **Data analysis and interpretation**

A classificatory system will be needed to find the correlations between data and recurring themes. Reality will be described, interpreted, read, analyzed, reconstructed and synthesized starting from the categories or types recognized (Corbetta, 2003, 83). The data collected will allow for either confirmation or refutation of emerging themes.

Typologies will be displayed in a matrix form (Oka & Shaw, 2000) and the report will be presented in a narration form.

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[1] All interviews and meetings will be audiotaped and transcribed.

### 3. *Trustworthiness and limitations of the research*

- **Validity**

> *"Validity is not a single, fixed or universal concept, but rather a contingent construct, inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of particular research methodologies and projects"*
> *(Winter, 2000).*

Validity is correlated to appropriate sampling procedures, multiple sources of evidence, triangulation, and grounding findings in the data.

- **Credibility**

Evidence is primary and the reconstruction of the researcher must prove to be faithful to the views expressed by the inquired. A *"prolonged engagement"* is usually needed in order to learn the culture of participants, test for misinformation and build trust (Lincoln & Guba, quoted in Oka & Shaw, 2000).

The researcher intends to avail herself of *"peer review"* or debriefing in order to test the working hypotheses and emerging designs with an informed outsider (Huberman & Miles, 1994, 439).

- **Transferability**

Cases are contextually embedded and the researcher will provide a thick description so that other researchers may make similarity judgments based on contextual applicability. It is not the responsibility of the former researcher however to account for possible generalizations.

- **Dependability**

The research design is flexible and the research findings will be produced by constantly changing interactions between researchers and participants.

> *"Far from being threats to dependability, such changes and shifts are hallmarks of a maturing – and successful – inquiry. But such changes and shifts need to be both tracked and trackable (publicly inspectable)."* *(Guba & Lincoln, quoted in Oka & Shaw, 2000)*

The researcher will consequently document meticulously all the operational steps of the research (Yin, 2003, 37-39).

- **Confirmability**

Confirmability builds on audit trails, which include recorded materials, field notes, transcripts, research diary, reflexive journal, and so on. The researcher will be accurate in record keeping but is perfectly aware that an auditor's analysis is such a complex and expensive business that it is restricted to *"high-stakes studies"* (Huberman & Miles, 1994, 440) and is therefore out of the question.

- **Expected benefits and limitations of the research**

It is very hard for the researcher to anticipate the potential outcomes of this inquiry.

Let us start with the deficits.

- ➢ the researcher is inexperienced and her degree of bias may affect the findings
- ➢ the subjects may not cooperate fully and may show mistrust
- ➢ the research may seem a potentially harmful invasion of privacy
- ➢ the researcher may find it difficult to play a double role as a member of the organization and as an inquirer
- ➢ the issues under study are thorny and may stir up conflicts and grievances
- ➢ the research will inevitably be fettered by time constraints.

On the other hand,

- ➢ the strong awareness that the whole research may be jeopardized by excessive involvement will lead to painstaking rigour
- ➢ the researcher's enthusiasm and commitment will hopefully "infect" the participants
- ➢ the staff may discover that there is something to gain as the researcher may reciprocate adequately
- ➢ this study can have practical implications for the context analyzed and will provide first-hand insight to the researcher in her double role
- ➢ the coordinator of the LS advocates this initiative and her support will be invaluable
- ➢ this inquiry may result in a collective meditation on our organization and hopefully produce reflective thinking and stir up a debate
- ➢ there is usually no time for such activities in our agenda, and it is high time to change our priorities.

It is fundamental to underline, however, that the aim of research is to produce knowledge by applying the methodology correctly, and more specifically:

- ➢ in the best of hypotheses, this inquiry will produce guidelines for more effective training and knowledge management aimed at encouraging participative leadership and empowerment;

➢ otherwise, it will provide insight into the perceptions and interrelations of leadership and empowerment of a limited sample analyzed in its real-life context, an issue which has not yet been thoroughly explored within Italian academic libraries.

# *CONTENTS*

# *APPENDIX*

- **Research planning**

| January – June 2004 | Literature review on academic libraries as learning organizations |
|---|---|
| May– mid-November 2004 | Research proposal |
| November 2004 - Ongoing | Starting a research diary – Setting up a research database |
| November 2004 | Research design – Sampling - Asking permissions - Pilot study - Observing committee meetings - Transcriptions |
| December 2004 | First round of interviews - Transcriptions – Classification - Observing committee meetings |
| Whenever needed | Informal conversations with the key informant - Peer review or debriefing |
| January 2005 | Second round of interviews - Examining archival records and documents - Observing committee meetings - Transcriptions - Classification |
| February 2005 | Data analysis and interpretation (classificatory system) -Refocusing if necessary – Further data collection (if needed) |
| March 2005 | Data analysis and interpretation (typologies – matrices) |
| April 2005 - May 2005 | Summing up and reporting – narration – building theory |

- **Caution**

- Most of the activities above overlap, as data collection is interwoven with data analysis and interpretation.
- In case studies the researcher himself becomes a research tool and is committed to letting the theory emerge from the data.
- Record keeping and maintaining an audit trail will be given the greatest attention.
- The case study is a comprehensive and flexible research strategy, and the line of inquiry should never be closed until data saturation is reached.
- This may delay the research, as further sources of evidence may be needed.