

Something As Good As a Budget Increase?

Robert F. Moran, Jr.

“Damn! She is going to make trouble!” says a public library director as an influential community member who is also a friend of a board member who leaves her office. “Her insistence that the library not divert book funds from traditional subjects to meet the needs of Hispanics moving into our community is impossible. Why doesn’t the board understand that a library supporting a changing community needs a larger budget? Where am I going to find more money for books? Perhaps we can put off public computer upgrade one more year, or . . . if only we had more money!!”

Or, another situation. “Not another one! That is the third faculty member this week insisting that if the library is going to rely on digitized sources, it must keep its network up and running. If only we could have diagnosed that network failure sooner. But with our staff, finding a bug introduced by the new acquisition system is going to take time. If only we could hire the tech support person we have been requesting for the last three years. Not only would we have one more person to work on breakdowns, but we would be able to send our tech staff for regular training. We’ve got to have more staff.”

The budget is too low to do everything that is expected; the staff is too small to get everything done. We just have to find more money. They just don’t understand that without more staff we can’t possibly do everything they want. The data I have been showing haven’t been impressive enough, so I will just have to get better data. Or, I am going to have to stop everything else I do and spend all my time on development. Or, we will cut back hours and let the users feel the pinch; if they start complaining, maybe we will get the staff we need. The only way to solve problems like these is with more money and staff! Or is it?

What about that resource to which we give so little credence, the minds of our staffs—the human mind, the most incredible reality we experience—logical, capable of reasoning, analytic, intuitive, creative, possessing innumerable memories, perpetually interacting with the environment. Computers are awesome; the human mind is in another realm of capability.

How many more solutions to a problem are there that never occur to the one or two people responsible for solving it? Ten? A hundred? A thousand? How much do we

use the entire intellectual capability of the library to find these? One mind, limited by constraints of time as well as by what is usually done? Two minds, each of which is limited by organizational expectations and interpersonal dynamics, as one administrator consults with another? A group of minds in a meeting, each one constrained by organizational roles and organizational culture as well as interpersonal and group dynamics?

What will happen if the minds of the staff are engaged in solving major problems? What will happen if staff believe their ideas are welcome? What will happen if the minds of the staff are seen as sufficiently important to the library’s success that efforts are made to help them develop? With budgets flat and little likelihood they will increase significantly, it may be time to find out.

The organization structures and systems we have inherited stand in the way. They were designed to take advantage of the physical abilities of staff (the production line), to be efficient by limiting staff activities (functional divisions, job descriptions), and to exercise authority and control throughout the enterprise (“Here is your job description; this is what—and only what—you are to do” “That is not the way we do things here!” “That’s none of your concern!” “Concentrate on what you are supposed to be doing, and leave that to those who have the responsibility and know what they are talking about.”) Traditional structures and systems tell staff every day, don’t use your mind, just follow the procedure. In those instances when a librarian exercises analysis and problem solving skills (reference, for example), decision making is limited within a specified set of responsibilities. Even at these times, imagination and creativity are restricted by habits formed in the constrained environment of a traditional organization.

In addition, organizational culture inhibits staff. After being told year after year of the limited set of appropriate activities available to them, it does not occur to them to think more broadly than their immediate responsibilities, much less to express ideas regarding problems others are



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expected to deal with. How often have library managers asked an assembled group of staff for advice only to be met with silence? Ninety-nine percent of their time is spent doing what they are told. How could they be expected to be comfortable giving advice?

One of the most significant benefits of formal organizational development programs, such as The Learning Organization and Appreciative Inquiry, is fully engaging staff, their skills and their minds in the enterprise. Experienced consultants have the expertise and skills to help the library through what is a difficult transition. Libraries with resources to undertake a formal organizational development (OD) program ought to do this. For libraries lacking these resources, there are some activities and changes that can counter organizational and cultural obstacles to a fuller involvement of staff with an accompanying increase in opportunities to assist with their minds as well as their skills.

Lead the staff in the identification of the library's purpose. Peter Scholtes offers the best definition of purpose. "Purpose is best defined from a customer's point of view. Rather than simply describing your products and services, describe the benefits or capability your customers acquire as a result of interacting with you."¹ In other words, the library's purpose ought to be expressed in terms of user needs which the library can fulfill. Involve the entire staff, everyone, full and part timers, in identifying these needs.

To get started, borrow from the Appreciative Inquiry approach to OD. What is the library doing well right now? What user needs are being met well? How can these needs be best expressed as goals? Then, are there any user needs that might be filled better? Needs that we do not now fill, but we have the expertise to do so?

The identification of purpose must not deteriorate into anything similar to mission-statement writing forced on us in the 1990s. That exercise was abstract and unrelated to every day. Also, its value was not immediately obvious to all and, so, done too quickly to be meaningful. The identification of purpose, on the other hand, is specific, related to day-to-day activities. The value of a common understanding of the library's purpose can be seen by everyone; it relates the apparently disparate activities of the staff.

Lead the staff in the creation of a shared vision. What do you want the future to look like? Or better, what is the future you want to create? Having identified the library's purpose, imagine a future when the library is fully meeting these educational, research, and recreational needs of its users. What would the library be doing? What would it look like?

Shared vision is uniting and energizing. Through history, the most common characteristic of successful enterprises is a vision shared by all members. The visions of military, political, religious, and business leaders inspire their followers to success. The most common characteristic

assigned to successful leadership is the creation and infusion of a vision meaningful to followers. The creation of a vision is not limited to the charismatic leader; groups can conceive a desired future.

Visions that motivate and energize are more than ideas about a desired future; sharing means more than common understanding. Before a vision will energize, it must be felt. Most people are not initially motivated by a statement of the purpose or mission of the place where they work. They are motivated by what is meaningful to them as individuals. Each of us has a personal vision that motivates us, a desired status in which personal needs are fulfilled. Some of these needs are personal—success, money, acceptance—others are other-directed—family, friends, community. The shared vision of a library must tap into personal vision. For example, for many who choose librarianship as a profession, service is an important part of their lives. Failure to grasp this broader understanding of vision has been the reason for little benefit being derived from so many vision-creating exercises.

How to tap into personal vision? Let the entire staff develop the vision. The creation of a vision is not a management activity the result of which is passed on to the staff for comment. It is a picture developed by the entire staff.²

Make learning part of the job. In the presence of ever-expanding technology, new constituencies, and new services, the need to see that staff continually develop their skills is obvious. In addition, there is no better way to engage the minds of your staff and to encourage them to rise above the day-to-day routine of their jobs than to see that they are engaged in a learning activity. Also, if the minds of the staff are an important resource, it only makes sense to help them improve themselves. This latter makes it reasonable to encourage staff to engage in learning beyond skills-related training.

Add learning to each job description. Ask each staff member to present a plan for learning each year. Reward each on the extent to which they complete this plan; include the extent to which it is completed in annual appraisals, and as part of the basis for annual salary increases.

Cross training. Traditionally encouraged as a way to provide variety for staff and to develop backup for emergencies, training in the processes of another's job also broadens a staff member's understanding of the library and can help in planning and problem solution. A person whose usual assignment is in another unit brings a different perspective that can result in solutions or service adjustments unseen by those who work in the unit regularly.

Encourage risk. There are not many staff members willing to suggest a new idea in a risk-averse library. There, the prevailing feeling is "Leave things alone"; "Don't rock the boat." I have heard many managers say that they encourage their staffs to take risks. I have not heard about many

managers who have praised a staff member for a project which the staff member suggested and which was a failure. I have not heard of situations in which such a failed project was used as the reason for a salary increase. Rewarding risk is what encouraging risk means.

Worth it? Each of these suggestions requires a significant commitment of time. The identification of a library's purpose and the search for a vision are difficult and not accomplished easily. Months, not days or weeks, are needed. The requirement that staff undertake learning activities as part of their jobs takes time away from their responsibilities. Cross training does the same. Allowing staff to spend time on projects that may be unsuccessful may mean lost time.

Why bother? That depends on the assessment by each library's administrative team of the current status of the library and the likelihood of its continued success. More money and more staff remain most likely to lead to improvement. Where these are unlikely or where innovation and expansion are important values, fuller engagement of staff minds provides a third alternative. Additional solutions to difficult problems will be uncovered, new opportunities discovered, and, perhaps, additional sources of funds will be found, as has happened in one academic library. There, a staff member used U.S. government pub-

lications to create a demographic service for community business and agencies and contributed net income to the library acquisitions budget.

A Caution. Attractive ideas for better management most often become impotent fads because the ideas are not fully understood, are partially implemented, or not given the time required to introduce something new. If any of the recommendations above are to have benefit, sufficient time must be given to their implementation. Begin by reading or rereading *The Fifth Discipline*.³ If commitment of a significant amount of time on the part of all staff cannot be given to the identification of purpose, or the development of a shared vision, or if significant time is not available for learning or cross training, don't even begin, it will be a waste of time.

References

1. Peter R. Scholtes, *The Leader's Handbook* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 61.
2. Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, paper (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1994), 205-32.
3. Ibid.

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