

## Getting Started with Organizational Design at Your Library

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### Is Your Library a Business?

Loosely defined, a business is a group of people working together to achieve a desired result by providing goods or services to stakeholders in conjunction with inflows and outflows of money. To break this loose definition of "business" down in a library-centric context: first, a library employs people with different responsibilities and skills that work in concert with each other to fulfill the operational needs of a library. Second, when the operational needs are fulfilled, goods (e.g., books, articles) and services (e.g., programming, events) are provided to stakeholders (e.g., students, community members). Third, stakeholders pay fees or taxes (inflows) to provide the financial resources necessary to pay employee salaries and fund resource acquisitions (outflows). These three steps, at a basic level, create an interconnected process that is the lifeblood of any organization, including libraries. How this interconnected process is structured varies by organization. Taken collectively, however, the commonalities between approaches to these processes leads to a managerial field of study called *Organizational Design*. Before this concept can be explored further, some background terms need to be established.

#### *What is an organization?*

According to the Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology, a formal organization is a "social system organized around specific goals and usually consisting of several interrelated groups... [and] governed by clearly stated, rigidly enforced norms" (Johnson, 2000). Organizations come in all shapes and sizes: from the academic world to the private sector, from a single person operation to a multinational corporation employing hundreds of thousands, from civilian to military or from non-religious to religious, to highlight a few broad paradigms. While these paradigms are all very different from each other, they all conform – to varying degrees – to the loose definition of business above to be successful. Furthermore, they also distribute power and responsibilities in ways they each deem to be most efficient.

Complex coordination, therefore, necessitates bureaucracy, the distribution of power through hierarchy with clear lines of authority - the military's rank system is a classic example.

The military utilizes relatively few General ranks because coordinating activities would be impossible otherwise. Despite being "complex," the simple goal is to create efficiencies through division of labor, and it is a hallmark of modern organizations. Although bureaucracy does have clear advantages, it should also be noted that it can make adaptation to changes difficult for an organization in certain circumstances, which may result in failure if not identified and corrected (Weber, 1958).

### *What is organizational behavior?*

Understanding the inherent conflict between the goal and reality of bureaucracy leads to and requires an exploration of organizational behavior, which studies "how people join together to accomplish tasks toward a common goal" (Organizational Behavior, 2012). Organizational behavior itself is still a developing field and does not have one generally-accepted definition because it draws from the experience of other disciplines, such as social psychology and political science, and contains a wide variety of concrete (e.g., extrinsic motivation and resource management) and abstract (e.g., leadership and ethics) concepts. Together, these disparate components help managers and researchers to better understand why individuals and groups (and, by extension, the organization) act the way they do.

### *What is organizational design?*

Channeling the latent activities and behaviors of individuals and groups into a coherent and concerted effort necessitates an understanding of organizational design, which is the "conscious molding of the organizational structure so that it attains ends that are valued" (Donaldson, 2013). Core factors here involve, but are not limited to, how an organization is differentiated (providing multiple offerings), integrated (linking different areas), and centralized (determining authority). Essentially, this means that the way leadership oversees aspects of the organization's structure and culture impacts efficiency, motivation of employees, and implementation of strategy.

### *Importance of culture and change?*

How an organization implements the core factors of its organizational design affects its culture and its ability to change. For example, tech start-ups are generally considered innovative and flexible because they tend to adopt decentralized, informal operational structures that encourage individuals or groups to be proactive; otherwise, they may not be able to respond to constantly changing customer demands. Conversely, large multi-national corporations tend to be centralized and formal in their decision-making processes, which potentially leads to

extended bureaucratic processes that sometimes fail to decisively act upon potential opportunities.

While these examples are stereotypes in many ways, they do illustrate how differently organizations may structure themselves in their response to various stakeholder needs, behaviors and values. Consequently, the success or failure of an organization's set of responses determines its durability and resiliency. Thus, the goal here is not to provide an exhaustive list of theories or concepts, but rather to encourage cross-disciplinary introspection related to academic libraries in an era of chronic uncertainty in ways that might yield yet-to-be-realized benefits from areas not traditionally explored by academic libraries.

### *Moving forward*

So, is your library a business? Or is this even the correct question to ask? Maybe a better question is: *What can libraries learn from the business world to become more successful?* One such mechanism is the concept of organizational design. This means taking a hard look at an organization's structure, culture, procedures, and systems, then assessing how things need to change (Office of Personnel Management, 2018). Thinking about your organization's design is a foundation for strategic planning. The following section poses a conceptual framework, followed by contemplative questions to encourage your library to start or continue conversations related to organizational design in order to facilitate planning and change.

### **Organizational Design Framework**

Organizational design concepts can be gathered into an arrangement of constructs that build upon each other. Here, we have broken them down into six thematic areas: foundation, structure, culture and values, domain, strategy, and capacity for change.

FOUNDATION, the basic components – a mission, vision, and general goals. The library has a history that informs its current activities and a role in its community with stakeholders.

STRUCTURE, the library's arrangement – how the employees, outputs, and departments are organized. The library has organizational charts, hierarchies, and delineations of responsibilities that affect decision making and balances of authority.

CULTURE AND VALUES, the collective norms and behaviors – how the employees behave, unique rituals, and library-specific philosophies. The library has a set of unwritten rules (both formal and informal) that govern how employees interact, and these can impact the language, dress, and even ethics of the library.

DOMAIN, the library's products, services, and customers – information, bibliographic instruction, community. The library has a defined, but not finite, range of offerings and customer service area.

STRATEGY, the library's method for achieving goals – ideas, planning, and action. The library has a need to continuously set goals and keep up with trends to maintain relevancy.

CHANGE, the library's response to external and internal stimuli. The library has an obligation to react and adapt to customer and employee needs.

These six constructs can serve as impetus for library leadership to think about the library's foundation, culture and values, structure, domain, strategy, and capacity for change. The following questions are designed to make administrators consider the library's setup and direction, to identify potential misconfigurations, and put the library in the best possible alignment with current stakeholder needs while simultaneously anticipating future ones.

### *Considering the Foundation*

At its heart, each library has a foundation. Start by delineating your mission and vision statements. Think about the overall purpose – why the library exists. Acknowledge up front that there will be conflicts in your foundation, including competing goals, prioritization difficulties, unclear authority, and opposing stakeholders.

- Do your mission and vision accurately represent your library right now?
- What are the library's overall goals? How do you evaluate them?
- What about your library's history? As it grew, what problems did it experience?
- What is your library's role in the larger community?
- Who are your stakeholders? Are there potential conflicts between any of your stakeholder groups?

### *Considering Culture and Values*

A culture is intangible but vividly apparent, and it is made up of your organization's and the profession's values. Employees may rally behind information access and the freedom of information. There may also be an emphasis on the library's role within the community's larger mission. Collective values derive from staff and can include: innovation, collaboration, empowerment, risk-taking, partnerships, user engagement, flexibility, use of our expertise, global engagement, contributions to university success, thinking about the future, and mutual support of one another.

- How would you depict the library's culture? Does it enhance the library, or could the culture be improved?
- How do people behave and interact with each other? How is conflict resolved?
- Does your library have formal training and/or onboarding programs?
- What other socialization is there? Is employee engagement an ongoing consideration?

### *Considering Structure*

Your library has a hierarchy. It can have many or few managers, wide or small spans of control. It could be arranged by functional area, or geographic location. These considerations can affect many things. Decisions can be delayed, messages can be misrepresented or misinterpreted, and things filter out. Employees can be demoralized by the amount of bureaucracy involved and innovation can be stifled because of a long approval process that often requires tracking down multiple signatures. Different units may have more or less authority.

- How is your library structured? Why does it use this kind of structure?
- What is your hierarchy of authority?
- Which group or department is the most powerful? Why?
- Are there any issues your library is dealing with in managing its activities? Would adjusting the structure solve these problems?

### *Considering Domain*

It is generally accepted that a library's primary domain is that of "information." However, thinking beyond just that specialization, you can consider options and limitations. Budgetary constraints limit resources and services that the library can make available, thus adding to uncertainty in the environment. Complexity can grow if the library considers adding new services or staff. The library's environment is affected by constantly changing technologies, vendors, and difficulties in predicting community needs.

- Who is the primary community and what is the library's chief role in that community?
- How does information about your community affect your domain?
- Might your library have more than one domain?
- Are there new ways the library could create value? How might your library achieve them?

### *Considering Strategy*

A library, just like a business, needs to consider its "principal operational strategy" and regularly evaluate how successful it is in pursuit of said strategy. This involves how the library chooses to build upon its core strengths and domain. There should be a consideration of potential conflicts as well as recognition of operational constraints.

- How are decisions made? Who has signatory authority? When do problems occur?
- What kind of innovation exists in your library? Does it happen fast or slowly?
- Does your library have a "sunset" plan to evaluate services and programs?
- What do you think could be done to improve the way your library operates?
- What core competences does your library promote? Do they give your library an advantage?

### *Considering Change*

Regardless of whether your library changes fast or slow, you must be alert for situations that require change and have the ability to effectively adjust. Libraries that are not willing to restructure or alter their domains will eventually suffer from inertia. Resistance to change comes from uncertainty, fear, habit, and timidity.

- Think about your library's capability to learn over time. Can it adapt quickly?
- Why does your library want to change (or not change)? What kinds of changes have you recently made?
- How has your library changed its structure or culture to build on its domain?
- How does your library respond to changing stakeholder demands?
- Think about external forces affecting your library. Which are the most important forces that you have to deal with? What uncertainties lay ahead?

### **Conclusion**

We present the concepts of organizational design here, along with prompting questions, as precursor thoughts to strategic planning, reorganization, and assessment. Strategic introspection is a challenging, yet invaluable process that often gets lost in daily minutiae. The questions for consideration and organizational design framework constructs purposefully challenge the status quo. Adapting and utilizing knowledge from other disciplines, specifically

from business, may provide insights that lead to more effective libraries that respond to a rapidly changing world proactively, rather than reactively. No single solution exists that successfully addresses every obstacle your library may face, but asking tough questions with honest feedback will help to establish a baseline and to better understand the relationships between priorities. Sometimes, even the simple act of thinking about an issue from a different perspective can lead to breakthroughs that may not have otherwise occurred.

### Note

Questions adapted from *Organizational Theory, Design, and Change* by Gareth Jones. (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2013).

### Additional Resources and Suggested Reading

**Harvard Business Review (HBR)** provides thematic articles on a variety of business-related topics that often focus on practical applications of theory and research. An additional suggested reading is:

Beeson, John. "Five Questions Every Leader Should Ask About Organizational Design." Accessed March 30, 2018. <https://hbr.org/2014/01/five-questions-every-leader-should-ask-about-organizational-design>

**Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM)** is one of many professional organizations that provide information on human resources best practices, blogs, articles and whitepapers that provide insight on ways to improve organizational functionality. An additional suggested reading is:

Wiengardan, Steve. "Building the Future: HR's Role in Organizational Design." Accessed March 30, 2018. [https://www.shrm.org/academicinitiatives/universities/teachingresources/Documents/Wiengarden\\_Building%20the%20Future\\_HRs%20Role%20in%20Organizational%20Design\\_IM\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.shrm.org/academicinitiatives/universities/teachingresources/Documents/Wiengarden_Building%20the%20Future_HRs%20Role%20in%20Organizational%20Design_IM_FINAL.pdf)

**Deloitte**, one of many international consulting firms, regularly conducts research surveys to provide insight into contemporary workplace trends. One such report is called Global Human Capital Trends, which can be summarized by: "Organizations face a radically shifting context for the workforce, the workplace, and the world of work." This is not unlike the suite of issues facing libraries and academia.

Deloitte. "2017 Global Human Capital Trends." Accessed March 30, 2018.

<https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/human-capital/articles/introduction-human-capital-trends.html>

**Coursera** is one of many online learning platforms that provide structured/semi-structured, go at your own pace content. In particular, it offers a multi-module series of courses called the Strategic Leadership and Management Specialization. The third module focuses on organizational design. (Note: payment and other restrictions may apply, depending on the course or module.)

University of Illinois. "Strategic Leadership and Management Specialization." Accessed March 30, 2018. <https://www.coursera.org/specializations/strategic-leadership>

**Textbooks and other non-academic literature (including news)** provide a wealth of information, depending on your needs and interests. (If on a college campus, consider reviewing the syllabi from the local business department, too.) One book to consider reading is *Reinventing Organizations* by Frederic Laloux and Ken Wilber, which focuses on pioneering organizations and how they have found success in today's digital and dynamic world. Another example is from Forbes, which articulates some high-level guiding principles of organizational design that are easily digestible.

Neilson, Gary, Jaime Estupiñán, and Bhushan Sethi. "10 Guiding Principles of Organization Design." Accessed March 30, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/strategyand/2015/04/01/10-guiding-principles-of-organization-design/#2e382fc05888>

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