Pimp My Library

Julie Todaro

I know I should like renovating and building libraries, but I don't. Oh, I like the fact that we are getting money for new environments and we have great administrative support, *and* I think getting there *is* often worth the trip, but it's like cosmetic surgery: you're not sure what you want; it hurts while it's happening; other people have many ideas about what you should be doing and what looks best; it costs way more than you were originally told; and it never quite looks like you planned. All of this being said, if you go down that road—and you will—what should you look out for?

I've written a few columns on various aspects of renovation and building. These columns typically spur reaction from the field by others who are attempting to live through construction and change. I have covered those areas most painful to me, and those activities that—literally—boggled my mind because of their complexity and absurdity. The column that gathered the most interest was the installation of a new phone system, and the number of people it took to install it from beginning to "end." I received a number of comments: "Hang in there"; "I'm suffering too and I thought I was the only one"; and my favorite, "This was so bad, do we *really* need any phones at all?"

So, while catching my breath (a new building in 2005–2006; a renovation in 2006–2007; planning for a historic building renovation in 2009; surprise planning for the set up of a small "we're only going to be in there for three years" workforce library environment; AND a new, larger-all-new-buildings-campus in 2009) and moving to new projects, I created, just for you all, an irreverent but breathtakingly real checklist for facilities issues. I know by now you're saying "Poor Eve!" but I'll reply, "Fasten your seat belts, it's going to be a bumpy night . . ."[1]

Getting ready for the "big day," or the building project of new construction or renovation, is equivalent to D-Day (with all respect to any veterans). Internal to the library staff you need to establish a chief (or project manager) for the project with the understanding that this

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person has to be—as much as possible—on-site and at all meetings; that is, the go-to person for all activities. More later on this advice.

This person must be armed and knowledgeable with content, including any standards for space or design; past statistics; vendor content from a number of vendors; best practice discussions and data; articles; pictures; and Web sites. If possible, electronic files should be gathered as a clearinghouse or repository and brought to meetings (on a laptop) to provide visual reminders or triggers as well as to generate ideas. This kind of content generates and validates ideas, and provides rationale for choices and decision-making among group members.

Why so much content from others? While seemingly a no-brainer, one must be ready with real answers when asked "Why?" "I prefer the carpet squares," in and of itself isn't enough. Instead, "Carpet squares provide us with easy cleaning and replacement for wear, as well as opportunities to access existing floor outlets or install new ones. They also—if color or surface designs such as weaves are a factor—provide opportunities to coordinate service or point-of-use distinctions with color and carpet detailing."

This chief individual must also establish a system for capturing content, discussions, and decisions in a systematic fashion. Can this be as simple as a facilities notebook with project section or element tabs? Yes. Can it be as sophisticated or as high-tech as project management software loaded on to your laptop for use during project meetings? Yes. The key issue here is the *consistent* capturing of discussions and—most importantly—decisions as they relate to specific in-person or online meetings as well as to phone discussions or work completed through e-mail and chat functions. Is reminding others or resolving misunderstandings or conflicts as easy as "I thought we decided on the other PMS color the last time we met?" No. Instead, the project chief needs to be able to access or flip to the color or design portion of the print or software and say "When we met on April 4 the group decision was to go with PMS xxx. I sent a follow-up mail listing this decision along with our others that same week." Or "We had three working days to get back to the group after our January meeting. I called on the second morning [insert date] and

left the information with [insert name] and indicated I had chosen [insert item]."

Record-keeping methods should include large, visually clear, month-by-month calendars that can be personalized and updated as the project progresses.

Who's on first? Some issues to consider:

From day one, get everyone's cell phone number, e-mail, and any other information you need to get in touch with people. While you are gathering this, give out your information. Ask for a discussion on a call list and get answers to "Who should be called first for answers to questions?" "Who should be copied on e-mails?" and "Who shouldn't?" Ask for parameters for communication. "How early is too early to call? How late is too late?"

Mount a white board for outstanding activities that individuals need to be reminded of and include columns for what, who, when, and status. Not every project aspect goes on a white board, only those things left undone toward the end of the project; for example if only four phones are installed instead of the required five, in column one, "what," the board should read "installation of ref. desk phone needed." In column two, under the "who" heading, "telephone subcontractors–xxx"; under column three, "when," "installed by the fifteenth of the month"; then under the "status" column, "completed installation on 5/13."

A more difficult task is the Q&A that your staff members need to have with workers who enter and exit. Individuals need scripts to give them greetings and better ways to ask questions. "What are you doing here?" doesn't work. "Hi! What will you be working on today?" or "We're expecting a phone installation before Friday. Are you here to complete the installation?"

Another impossible task is trying to get people who enter in your absence to leave a note. Instead, get large Post-It notes and put them on the items scheduled to be fixed. Put what and when on the note, then place them on or near the area or item to be worked on. You can ask them to note if they came in on the paper itself, and even date when they came in and finished or the status of the fix, but that doesn't often happen. Instead, keep track of the notes, where they are, and when they disappear. Consider it a sign if they do disappear!

Ask what languages workers on the project are likely to speak. If you don't speak that language, read up on it and train others on simple questions, project words, and so on that you may need to know. When the workmen arrive, find out who can translate the more complicated things that you may need to ask or have answered. Learn as many names as you can. Give them your name and other staff member names.

Explain the deal breakers for any security issues you may have, including, but not limited to, doors to remain locked or open; areas or equipment that must remain covered; furniture that can't be moved or stood on; and signs that must remain up.

After you get a feel for the project, create a series of premade signs in multiples, using and different colors of thick markers and hung with special, heavy-duty tape (regular tape often doesn't work with gritty surfaces). In addition, make some shells of signs that might communicate behavior such as "Caution" or "Do Not Enter," and then have lines or blanks that can be filled in on the spur of the moment. Always sign or pre-sign, such as "Library Management," and then leave room for the date the sign is to be posted; the date or "thanks" can be entered in manually with special markers. Invest in some free-standing, inexpensive sign posts that can be placed with the premade printed signs in areas where signs can't be placed with great visibility, such as near or in front of a space that has been painted.

Ask what the roles of subcontractors are. Are they one-time workers who leave after they finish their one activity? Do they have an open contract, and can you ask them to return without separate billing? Do you have the authority to ask them to do more work? Who does?

Other considerations:

Location, location, location: While it isn't always possible to be on site or at every meeting (as so many of them happen on the spur of the moment among individuals on the project), your project chief or a knowledgeable designee must be available as often as possible AND should be proactive in asking for meetings when actions are needed or when pushing for collaborative activities. Seldom are these meetings at workday times; the very earliest mornings or after a work day ends are more common, so work schedules for a project chief need to be as flexible as possible, while individuals should also be preparing to spend any extra hours that may be needed.

Project runway: For the duration of the project, bring your own hard hat to work (and an extra for a guest or another staff member so you aren't dependent on three project members having to return to the trailer when the four of you decide to do a walk-through). In addition, from day one, wear close-toed shoes, be prepared to get very dirty, or bring a number of work jackets or coats to throw over your clothes. Find out what identification needs to be carried for access to worksites so you can carry your ID (or a specific project ID) and specific name tags as needed.

Glacier speed: Don't be surprised if certain stages of the projects slow down to a crawl or stop. Projects have their own life and typically you will observe a wonderful initial fast pace, a middle-of-the-project slowdown, and a big slowdown toward the end. Be prepared. Note project progress–or lack thereof–in your calendar.

Daily bread and comfort food: Ask project managers for schedules that, even if only loosely defined, let you know approximately when workers arrive, break, lunch, and leave for the day. Spend a little money on project workers by providing morning sweets or fruit and candy for after lunch.

What? WHAT?: Explain how workers may or may not be able to use radios or music in the workplace. Advice:

while I am typically relatively tolerant on worksites, if you're smart, tell them they can't listen to music or talk radio. There may be concerns over content and a constant discussion over levels of volume.

Every breadth you take: Be watchful and observant. Each morning and each night, walk the space where you are allowed to be present (another reason for your hard hat) and take notes. What was left? Any equipment left out or on? Doors left unlocked? Work not going the way you thought? Something painted incorrectly? The door is on backwards? (I've written about this before, but if you see me in person and you want to see me weep or laugh inappropriately ask me about my two quiet study doors that were installed with locks. I asked them to be replaced without locks and they came and installed bathroom doors. No, really.)

Data are: If you scoff at the rest of the suggestions, at least take this advice . . . buy a digital camera as well as several inexpensive disposable cameras for indoors and outdoors. As you walk around and take careful notes, take a picture of an issue or problem (where appropriate), as well as something you like. Get these developed as the project moves along, and keep both print and digital copies. Then, if the floor is taped down very well at the first day of the project but as the project progresses it comes loose and the flooring is suffering, and you find you aren't there at the same time the workmen are or you can't speak their language, leave a copy of the picture of how it looked the first week of the project so they have a frame of reference. In addition, workmen often change during the project. Documentation is critical to success, both print and visual.

Speed dating: Date and initial everything. For example, every time you get a floor plan—even though it may have a preprinted date on it or it is marked final—you need to date and assign your own status. Coordinate project meeting, printed content, and decisions made with the same dates and initials.

Please to get from streets: Find out what project, construction emergency, and contingency plans are by project members. Take special note of these and make some of your own plans; buy some of your emergency supplies.

No roof and it rains? How can you prepare to avert disaster? Invest in large plastic coverings or tarps with special tape and weighted anchors.

How are standard fire issues handled? Extinguishers? Alarms? Is everything still working in the midst of the project?

What should happen if workers get hurt? Standard workman's compensation? Bring in more medical emergency kits? Who do you call if someone is hurt? Or do you at all? Do you call the construction foreman, and then he or she calls the emergency medical service?

Ask when and where barricade tape can be used. Don't wait to use their tape. Get your own. In addition, consider other important activities to be emergencies as well, including, but not limited to, "the wrong technology is installed" or, "a location is marked to have an outlet installed and I don't think it belongs there."

Find a cleaner: Identify someone—identified by you or overall project managers—who can come in to solve problems quickly. Ask "What are their parameters? Cost? Timing? Do I need to get a sign off or do they have an open contract?"

Celebrate: Start your team off with a ribbon cutting and project t-shirts. Have a project name or a mascot. Connect with project workers every day and with project leaders often. Find people to thank and compliment. Be a manager who shows up more often than just to complain.

Finally, find things to celebrate and milestones to mark. Trust me, you think the project will never end, but it does. Can I promise you that you won't remember the labor pains? No, but if managed well and with an emphasis on being a team *member* and leading others through the process, it *is* worth the trip.

Reference

1. Darryl F. Zanuck, prod., and Joseph. L. Mickiewicz, dir., *All About Eve* (motion picture), Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 1950.