

Getting There in Small Steps

Robert F. Moran Jr.

Editor's note: Many of you know Robert Moran as the former editor of *LA&M*. He is now stepping into a new role—that of columnist. In his column, “Where Is Our Future?” Bob will look at circumstances likely to influence change in libraries as well as means for directing this phenomenon. Change and organization development has been a focus of Bob’s career since 1972.

The Bad News

Budget shortfalls, staff layoffs, and rejected bond initiatives are reported monthly in *American Libraries*. The American Library Association has announced that “libraries in at least 41 states (82 percent) report funding cuts of as much as 50 percent . . . Libraries report reductions of library personnel; salary freezes; reductions in operating hours (including some library closings); elimination of some programs and services such as bookmobiles and interlibrary loans; decreased books and materials budgets; minimal hiring of library professionals and staff; and an increased dependence on volunteers and part-time employees.”¹

Library managers are advised to mobilize citizen groups, lobby the legislature, and engage in fundraising. Periodically these are successful, but often for the short term only. Are we facing a future forever limited by the debilitating lack of resources?

The Good News

Resources follow perceived need. The current declining support for libraries is not an indictment of the library, but rather the result of societal, cultural, and technological changes. Library core values and competencies remain critical for a democratic society. Radical change in the broad context within which libraries exist has decreased the need for some traditional activities, and, hence, decreased the perceived value of libraries.

The traditional core competencies of libraries—“providing resources and services that support and facilitate the creation and dissemination of knowledge,”² or, in other words, “resources and services that support learners of all

ages,”—remain vital.³ It is, however, not clear what these resources and services are in the twenty-first century of online encyclopedias, multiplying nonprint media for both learning and entertainment, the democratization of publishing, and powerful competition in the information arena. A vital future depends on identifying the services that meet the personal learning and information needs of citizens, students, and clients most effectively. Citizens and administrators will provide budget support for services that are important to them and their constituencies.

Robert Martin in his discussion of the creation of public value provides a theoretical foundation for the identification of library services needed by the twenty-first-century citizen. Organizations in the private sector identify the need for products and services through market research, and then create and advertise these products and services. Public institutions such as libraries must do the same. They need to identify specific personal needs that libraries are best able to meet in a world defined by competition, ubiquitous technology, and ready access for the well-to-do to information of all kinds, and then create and advertise these products and services. In order to identify and make known viable twenty-first-century library services, Martin suggests that libraries must undertake these two major endeavors: marketing and collaboration.

Marketing is not just advertising. Marketing means finding out what potential users need, developing services to meet these needs, and then advertising these services. Libraries need to use established principles and processes of market research to determine not only what information needs potential users have, but also the point at which these needs are most effectively met.

The collaboration Martin refers to is with organizations and endeavors beyond those with which libraries have traditionally partnered—other libraries and educational institutions. Libraries need to recognize commonality with other departments, organizations and endeavors, especially those that appear to be competitors, and then be



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willing to approach these aggressively as potential collaborators.⁴ Examples include other governmental departments, social service agencies, computer departments, local for-profit information research agencies, and software development companies.

In Small Steps

Nice in theory, difficult in practice! Libraries with their severely limited budgets are already overwhelmed trying to carry out traditional services and create new technology-based activities. The operative question is “How does a library find resources to allocate to develop a marketing process or to pursue beneficial collaborative activities?” The answer to this question is “In small steps.”

The first step is personal acceptance on the part of all library staff that what has worked in the past is no longer sufficient. Everyone in the library needs to understand and accept this; there is already a growing awareness of this reality. However, in many libraries it has not yet reached the depth that will motivate action. This first step, then, is to develop an understanding among the entire staff of the broad context within which the library and its resources and services exist today. Strategic planning, a speaker series, and brown bag discussions fueled by relevant readings are but a few processes that will deepen this understanding. The way to a library responsive to learning and information needs in the twenty-first century starts with one of these or a similar process.

The next small step is finding a place to start the search for the learning and information needs that this library can best meet. This does not have to be fully developing a marketing plan, hiring a market researcher, or establishing a new staff position. Obviously, one of these is preferable. But if resources don't allow, there are other ways to implement this search. Do some of the staff belong to the Chamber of Commerce? Does the Friends of the Library group offer an opportunity for learning about new needs? Are some staff involved in social or political organizations? Does someone on the staff have an interest or background in market research? How can membership on university committees be used to learn about the faculty's changing needs? Can a well-designed and tested survey be administered to each information literacy class? Does the library's strong relationship with the business community provide an opportunity for focus groups within this user group? Are there existing relationships with other organizations in the information arena that could be better used, more fully developed? How can these be used to understand the values and goals of these organizations? There is a place to start for those who look with an open mind and imagination.

Once a place to start has been chosen, institutionalize it. Allocate identifiable resources to the activity. Assign responsibility, relieve the person responsible from a few other duties, and add the activity to the person's position description. Require at least monthly reports, and prepare a means for sharing these reports with all staff and for developing responses to them. Do not assign the responsibility to a committee or a task force unless each of the members has been relieved of at least one current responsibility.

Despite the current workload carried by all staff, every library can find some resources to allocate to the search for new services. There is something the library can stop doing! There is a service that can be stopped even though it is long standing and still provides some value to users. There is something that is less important than beginning an effort to find the services library users need now. (I am of the belief that everyone should take a course in microeconomics so as to learn marginal analysis and realize that there are times when organizations benefit when they stop doing something of value in order to begin something that is of even more value.)

Here is an example of beginning through small steps: A midsize academic library, recognizing the need to identify services that will assure its continued relevance, chose to reduce its receipts in the federal depository program by 40 percent and reassign the administrative and processing time to the identification and testing of new services. Specifically, the librarian with responsibility for government documents was assigned half-time to “research and development” with a corresponding reduction in government documents responsibility. The first two attempts at

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new services did not identify activities needed by the library's users. But they established an awareness of a broader context for the library's services and a readiness to try new things. On the third attempt, an on-demand statistical and demographic service was established for students, faculty, and community residents in a geographical area without such a service. The service has been successful to the degree that it is now self-supporting through funding from community organizations, which contract for the unit's services. This is an example of finding new services through a series of small steps. It is also an example of the understanding of and responsiveness to local conditions.

The final small step toward a library that meets the information and learning needs of its twenty-first-century constituency is finding a way to develop an organizational

structure and staff accommodative to change. Maureen Sullivan, in her article in the Fall 2004 issue of *LA&M*, lists and describes the range of organization development programs available to libraries. Two of these, the Learning Organization and Appreciative Inquiry are extensive programs of proven value for those libraries wishing to transform how they are organized, but each is more than a small step. An ongoing strategic planning process or a full job audit is less formidable. David Lewis in his article, "The Innovators Dilemma," suggests another, more manageable, approach to transforming a library's structure and opening staff to change:

I believe two things are essential to change the culture. First, change what individuals need to do to be successful in the organization and in their careers. Second, create structures that encourage and reinforce the cultural change. These would include:

1. Porous organizational boundaries that allow ideas and knowledge to flow in and out of the organization
2. Collaboration among all staff that creates the ability and willingness to share knowledge and expertise freely. This means, at least in part, addressing the long standing class distinctions between librarians and other library staff
3. Impatience which leads to a desire to explore, innovate, and change
4. Accountability and the ability and willingness to measure results and make consequences visible . . .
5. Trust that colleagues will exercise competence and good professional judgment even,

or especially, when they are doing things differently than you would.⁵

Perhaps the greatest challenge is getting started. There are few, if any, short-term payoffs. Persistence will be difficult for the same reason. The first paragraph here gives reason for starting and persisting.

What will libraries look like in 2025? Will books be as important as they are today? Will they be locations for learners to gather? Will there be reference desks? Will there be children's programs? Will they be undersupported relics of the print age? Will they be peripheral, important to some, but unused by most? Or will they carry forward the vitality and value that have characterized public, school, special, and academic libraries? I have no idea, but I do know they will look different, very different. They will look as they will look either because events external to the libraries determined their future, or because librarians in the first decade of the twenty-first century took control and directed their change.

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5. David W. Lewis, "The Innovator's Dilemma: Disruptive Change and Academic Libraries," *Library Administration and Management* 18, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 73-74.

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