The Search for Meaning and Significance in Public Libraries

A View of Employee Expectations and Organizational Leadership

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Gentlemen, I take it we are all in complete agreement on the decision here. I propose we postpone further discussion until our next meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about.

—Alfred P. Sloan

Postmodernity assumes the impossibility of depending upon universally observable and fixed phenomena as a guide to scientific, social, or institutional practice. The public library is in some ways a classic vestige of modernity, and in that respect it is a typical public organization. Yet, in many respects, examining the activities (and particularly the discontents) of a public library from the perspective of the postmodern dilemma can yield ways of seeing these same activities through popular organizational metaphors, thereby enhancing the library's ability to change destructive behaviors and improve employee morale and commitment.

The library is composed of employees of various ages, skill sets, and values—a heterogeneous collection of individuals who attempt to provide a public service. In the library's container marked "public service" one finds an assortment of resources and activities with emphases varying from community to community, but that primarily include collection development, programming and outreach, circulation, and reference and research services. In many communities a library might reasonably argue that it isn't provided with enough funding to satisfy patrons or its own expectations. Still, it makes long-range plans in anticipation of acquiring adequate future funding to fulfill both.

However, not all phenomena yield equally to observation from discrete vantage points. Each observer's understanding of the observed object's meaning differs. This is a postmodernist way of saying that not all observers and actors will agree with the library's own assessment of its funding requirements. Even so, steeped in modern traditions, the library operates reflexively on underlying assumptions emboldened as empirical fact that spin an organizational history and memory. It maintains well-worn paths of familiar behaviors that provide both comfort and frustration to its practitioners. Within its walls it maintains a relatively hierarchical management structure that provides information, particularly about the way things are and the way things will become, flowing downward on a "need to know" and a "few talk and many listen" basis.

The library achieves and it fails on an ongoing basis, delivering good service some of the time, excellent service occasionally, but ultimately never reaching its potential. This is so because many of its employees have had their own potentials blunted, frustrated, and stymied, partly because their facts and assumptions about the organization don't jibe with those of their leaders. Competing interests morph into competing truths about the organization, all of them formed from uniquely contextual understandings of the organization and its participants.

Two metaphors, provided by widely disparate sources, can help us to explain the postmodern dilemma for public libraries as well as to understand the roots of organizational disappointment on both an individual and collective basis, while at the same time providing leadership with clues about how public libraries can identify a healthier and more productive path. The metaphors are encapsulated in Plato's Allegory of the Cave and Jerry Harvey's Abilene Paradox.

But first, Robert Denhardt has observed in his book *In the Shadow of Organization* that all organizations are immortal, or made so by their employees.[1] So, too, is the public library. It is a permanent entity of culture and order that employees invest with all kinds of meaning, in an attempt to transcend their own mortality. This investment is real and without exception.

Employees establish their own personal relationships both within and with their workplace. The organization gives them place and permanence, an action context, so to speak. It is here that employees encounter requirements for behavior and comportment, as well as a license to act in the interests of the organization, and become, in a word, empowered. They are met with schedules and deadlines, enjoy real and imagined accomplishments, experience conflict and project blame. This polyglot of unspoken

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agreements, bargains, and expectations means that the organization can fail them in a variety of ways. It is a complex and genuine relationship, even if it is based on an erroneous understanding of the organization. Managers ignore this at their own peril.

There are many ways in which a manager and an organizational culture can thwart its employees in their desire to find meaning in productive activities. The establishment of policies and procedures that do not reflect either enough staff input or an embrace of critical input indicates a lack of courage on the part of leadership to seek, hear, or trust that input. These policies and procedures, which

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may only be protective coating for the legal and practical viability of the organization and its administration practitioners, are arrived at and implemented. However, they don't necessarily have the support of those who sanctioned them, and thus enforcement and observance of these policies and procedures will be erratic.

Public organizations demand perceptive and nuanced leadership. The foremost reason, of course, is they have an obligation to serve a public interest or constituency rather than the profit motive. Whomever the public organization serves, those are its shareholders. It is, according to management guru Robert Behn, "a moral imperative" to serve this public interest.[2] Public library managers must motivate staff to recognize, honor, and serve these interests in everything they do, as consistently as possible. Money, in this context of course, cannot motivate the staff to do so because it is rarely present in sufficient quantities.

Can this moral imperative motivate? That depends. It helps that many librarians heed the call of public service willingly. The "work" of the library is primarily service provision, and it is ongoing, without clear, targetable objectives that allow for the recognition of peak achievements. It is difficult to "star" in the public library environment, but it is relatively easy to be taken for granted. New skills and technologies must be mastered while high-quality public service is maintained. Performance pressure is perpetual.

The private sector may have more instant gratification and instant accountability (bonuses, promotions, and dismissals linked directly and objectively to performance expectations that are nonnegotiable), but the public-sector service employee is often pressured by low expectations and predisposed hostilities. Ninety-nine patrons can be served well, but if the one-hundredth patron perceives indifferent service or worse and chooses to act on this

disappointment, the previous ninety-nine patrons are quickly forgotten. Thus, the organization must serve its employees well before the public can be well served. This includes developing policies and procedures that allow the employee to experience success and gratification (and meaning and significance).

Every good manager knows that organizations must make decisions without knowing the ultimate outcomes of the actions these decisions set forth, just as they cannot hope to envision all possible options available to them at the time decisions are made. This is merely an indicator of our limited knowledge of possibilities and consequences as observed by organizational critics such as Herbert Simon and Charles Lindblom.[3]

In the history of any public library, decisions are made that create staff insecurity—feelings that can be likened to psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott's conceptions of "transitional objects and transitional phenomena."[4] Thought of as the stages between perceived and self-created worlds (much like the child's transition from wakefulness to sleep), there exists a realm of neutral territory that requires a fragment or totem of familiarity to ease the transition. Think of those decisive times when an organization finds itself unknowingly on balancing points. On the one hand, it still recognizes and honors past procedures and everyone shares a general understanding of library behavior. On the other, it is moving toward an unknown land of unimagined and unintended consequences.

As the library makes what in hindsight are these big decisions, incremental though they may appear at the time, staff members need to cling to these transitional objects to carry them to the new set of practices. These objects are most frequently attitudes about the meaningfulness (for example, comfort and security) of established practices, policies, and procedures. Organization and employees must be inculcated with the idea that there is existential virtue in risk taking.

Take for example the decision to purchase and implement a system designed to provide Internet filtering options as well as manage, distribute, and regulate public Internet access to the library. In any public library of any means, such a purchase represents an expensive, good-faith effort to secure the public from the perceived ills of unbridled Internet access, to comply with federal law, and also an endeavor to apportion Internet access in a manner that is fair to all who want it. It may or may not have been that those charged with administering this system on a daily basis from a public service perspective were queried about their thoughts regarding safe and equitable public Internet access. It is a fair guess that a committee would have been formed to address the issues surrounding the implementation of this new system. Moreover, the manner

of soliciting input may have appeared to be pro forma—the deed being done in all important respects and the committee be damned to the details—and most or all of those affected keenly recognize potential problems. Examples might include the inconsistent distribution of access for patrons, an unanticipated volume of clerical facilitation of the new access by professional staff, and a consequent perceived loss of "professional" reference activities. Now they are silently suffering the effects of Jerry Harvey's managed agreement and are merely hitching a ride on the Road to Abilene.[5]

Jerry Harvey "discovered" the Abilene Paradox in the summer of 1974, during a visit with his wife to his in-laws' house in Texas. It is identified by a form of groupthink, whereby participants in a discussion do not express themselves freely and honestly to the group but instead claim agreement with suggestions and proposals presented, regardless of their true feelings. In Harvey's case, it was a sweltering summer day, and he, his wife, and in-laws were relaxing on a shaded porch sipping lemonade and playing dominos when one of them suggested they drive to a diner in Abilene for dinner.

No one present saw this as a reasonable alternative to what they were already doing but no one chose to express their true feelings, and thus a kind of consensus was formed that drove them the fifty-three hot and dusty miles to Abilene, to a bad meal in a diner without air-conditioning. The reasons for this "false agreement" are carefully outlined by Harvey. We will examine the features of the paradox as defined by Harvey and examine how it is very commonly found in libraries. Identifying the presence of the Abilene Paradox through a careful analysis of organizational behavior is the first step to managing and controlling the behavior.

Public service is the point of the library spear. Regardless if all else is done well—materials selection and processing, systems and networking, cooperation and promotion—it may not matter if the library is poorly served by its librarians and circulation staff. This fact does not make these departments more important, but it does make them more critical in the public eye. This fact also requires that managers and administrators value and support these employees in their endeavor to provide quality public service by consistently applying public service policies and procedures that serve the employee as well as the patron. In this way, morale will be sustained even in the face of the most demanding patron, because staff members will know that all policies and procedures that affect their public service experience have been designed to give them the best chance at consistently pleasing the customer and that unintended consequences are anticipated and challenged, rather than ignored.

A manager has to be observant and scan for clues to behaviors that may be damaging the organization while also indicating symptoms of staff dysfunction. Those behaviors might be manifested uncomfortably close to home. All organizations engage in self-destructive behavior. And all too often, managers fall into patterns of self-recognition that limit their responsiveness to their patrons *and* their staff. In doing so, they begin to fundamentally change the values and performance of the organization without any conscious intent to do so. The Road to Abilene is littered with good opinions self-suppressed for the sake of a kind of agreement that normalizes transitional phenomena. Examples are legion, but one typical "trap" is the permanent fixture of an inflexible and unsatisfactory system of some sort, perhaps as the example given above for managing public Internet access that leaves both patron and staff dissatisfied and unnecessarily stressed, and which is now commonplace to many midsize and large public libraries.

All managers have limits to their understanding of employees and the work environment. Many organizations have found it fashionable to use tools such as the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory for employees to help them and their managers understand better their preferences for interaction and decision making in the workplace. Close observation of employee behaviors over time will reveal as much or more to the observant manager. Perhaps more important is asking questions such as, What do these employees require in order to feel culturally connected to the organization?

We do not have to examine Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to determine whether or not self-esteem or self-actualization plays a role in employee motivation. Without such connections or motivations the job is not nearly significant enough in the life of most employees to inspire them to anything more than mediocre effort. They need to be truly valued. They must be challenged to participate and

> What do these employees require in order to feel culturally connected to the organization? . . . They need to be truly valued. They must be challenged to participate and given a context for success.

given a context for success. Such an approach would assist managers in understanding employee expectations and better prepare their departments to anticipate and honestly respond to the unanticipated consequences of leadership decisions that produce the need for transitional objects to which anxious employees must cling.

The analytical component would be dependent on skillful facilitation within focus groups. Management expert Rosabeth Moss Kanter notes that meeting participants can easily develop the facility to serve in assigned roles that normally can generate hostility if embodied in a manager

or are otherwise not formally assigned.[6] While it may seem artificial, such assigned roles can encourage expression and discourage false agreement. Among these are gadflies, devil's advocates, fact checkers, and second guessers.

These focus groups would take place off-site if possible, or at the very least in a location remote from regular department meetings. Questions considered would include some that are designed for the purpose of specific reflection on past decisions and activities that produced employee fears and anxiety. Some would be more universal; these could be gleaned from feedback tools that examine dimensions of performance and interest, in order to create a composite image of the employees' understanding of and relationship to the organization. The focus group's purpose would not be to establish goals for the employee, but rather to surround the issues with a variety of employee experiences and perceptions. Below are some potential questions:

- What is your opinion of project X, both in its conception and implementation? Is there anything you feel we can do to make it more successful?
- You participated in the activities of project Y. How did you perceive your role in the group's activities? How satisfied are you with the outcomes?
- What would you like to see the division pursue this year? The library as a whole? What role do you see yourself having in these activities, if any?
- Who do you think is an unusually effective performer in the division and why?
- What activities of other divisions do you feel our division could learn from?
- What do other divisions need to know about our division?
- What one thing about the division would you wish management or the board to know about?
- Do you feel at liberty to express dissent toward managerial decisions in the organization?
- How would you define your relationship to the library and your position?

The responses can be coded to identify patterns that occur. A review process would be brief but semiannual. The purpose, it is clear, would not be to assess employee performance, but rather, to codify their perceptions and projections. Needless to say, not all participants will be willing participants. It is leadership's responsibility to infuse the process with sincerity and assure staff that decisions and outcomes based on information generated by the process will be forthcoming.

In making the case for yet another staff input tool, it must be remembered through all this that the leaders in an organization are susceptible to the same miasma of dissatisfaction infecting their staff and are captured by their own misleading fragments of truth about the organization. They create unconscious projections that can put unmanageable

distance between themselves and staff. These need to be exposed, shared, and deconstructed in an environment that does not threaten their perceived leadership needs any more than it threatens subordinates. Gareth Morgan points out in his *Images of Organization* that "unconscious projections often have self-realizing effects."[7] By enabling a department and its manager to become more conscious of these projections and perceptions, departmental behavior can be altered for greater efficiency, increased interdepartmental cooperation, and enhanced staff satisfaction.

Much like the allegory of Plato's Cave, and just as in their private lives, library employees construct reality in their professional lives and, to varying degrees, become captive to it. They feed their own beliefs about what is true of an organization and nurture them. This can happen individually or in groups as the organization takes on a shape, a self-definition, and a perception of its limitations. Typically, clusters of sympathies form around congruent perceptions of organizational behavior. Think of these clusters as shackle-mates in Plato's Cave—those most likely to perceive the same things in the fire's shadows. For example, if one employee perceives that the library administration is not doing enough to foster employee recognition in the form of merit pay, it might be because he or she has not received this type of validation for some time. This person may seek out other sympathetic peers who suffer from the same lack of validation. The disgruntled employee may not know who these people are initially, but he or she will bark up many trees before getting the sought response. Through this process, informal sympathies are formed that can be mutually sustaining and create organizational misbehavior that, if widespread, can be crippling to the organization.

Where the Allegory of the Cave breaks down for organizations is that, unlike in Plato's allegory, no one is outside the cave to return to it with an objective reality. Everyone is captive. Members may disbelieve those with differing views of organizational truths, but no one has a superior claim to the objective realities of the organization, including, and especially, the library administration. Organizations possess a composite reality based on the relationships of understanding woven by different perspectives on the shadows from all employees of the organization. These hidden relationships, which in and of themselves provide meaning and significance, are also often at the root of organizational conflict. Managers treat situations at face value, frequently because they cannot see all the activity hidden beneath expressions of dissent or false assent.

For example, an employee of the library's A division may believe that employees in the B division are underutilized, and this employee has an idea for a project for B division that would directly benefit A division. Perhaps it is a special cataloging project that indeed would be quite beneficial to the division and to the library as a whole. In fact, it may also benefit the public, which would gain relatively quick access to an entire batch of useful materials

that previously had not been made available. Unfortunately, B division is in no way underutilized and has no such time at present or in the foreseeable future for special projects such as this. In fact, B division is operating about 1.5 FTE short and cannot keep up with current projects, although the division's manager will not be making this case to the library administration for several weeks yet.

The source of the employee's perceptions can be traced back to the Cave. She had a flitting conversation with a disgruntled employee in division B. This was reinforced by subsequent informal conversations with other sympathetic employees in her own division in that ritualistic manner in which employees hammer out and shape comfortable and comforting truths based on mere fragments that render inaccurate representations. In any event, the suggestion is dismissed out of hand, and the employee retreats with her images intact.

Within this context of the Cave, it is important to attempt to assess employee expectations of what an organization should provide them. The degree to which the library employees give their loyalty to the organization is based upon the fulfillment of their expectations, and yet it is important to realize that these expectations in no way obligate the organization. Indeed, as has been seen, these expectations might be impossible for the organization to fulfill.

Inevitably some employees with unrealistic expectations become disgruntled with management but do not vocalize their disgruntlement. These perceptions enact their corrosive effects beneath observation and can lead to severe morale problems, irrespective of whether or not management is seriously flawed. This lack of organizational communication is a common phenomenon of the Abilene Paradox. Its effects are pernicious because library managers and administrators can be unaware for years of potentially useful alternatives to decisions, policies, and procedures that are ineffective and not supported by staff.

Because of the paradox, management may be the last to discover employee disgruntlement toward leadership because communication may, for all practical matters, have ceased to exist, with organizational dissent locked down to a level of "managed agreement," and all participants cruising well down Harvey's Road to Abilene.[8] This is exemplified by a lack of meaningful discourse on substantive topics. Ideas and problems are no longer willingly engaged in search of refinement or solution. There is no sense of a thesis experiencing antithesis creating synthesis. No one claims ownership of an idea. The ball is tossed in the air, eventually stops bouncing, and rolls to a stop. Lack of conflict. Agreement. Dysfunction. Abilene.

For example, let us suppose that an issue precipitated animated and constructive discussion when first introduced. This might be a major library-wide decision such as the purchase of a new integrated library system or the purchase and implementation of filtering and scheduling software for public Internet computers. It can also be limited to the divisional level, perhaps the consideration of adding or removing a public service point of contact or restricting or expanding access to special collections.

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Divisional discussions take place; questions that require answers are identified. Committees are formed, which, in due course, find answers to some or all of the questions, and they deliberate on the issues seen as pertinent and then write up observations and recommendations in the form of a report or proposal. What happens next reveals a lot about an organization and its ability to articulate and negotiate disagreement.

First, do the committee members share ownership of the ideas and recommendations contained in the report? Or have some participants unofficially withdrawn? Fear of separation from the group may keep them officially in the fold, but, in reality, they have ceased to function as group members and have tacitly assented to ideas they cannot embrace and for which they will not argue.

The report, the tangible product of hundreds of hours of staff effort representing five FTE over a span of fifteen months, reaches the desk of the divisional head who commissioned it. Among its contents are recommendations that may prove controversial for the divisional head to push forward, and, in fact, may generate no small amount of interdivisional conflict regarding boundary issues. At this point it may be unknown whether or not this conflict can be satisfactorily resolved. Still, it is a good report, which does not shirk the examination of potentially volatile issues. It reflects the integrity of those responsible for making decisions under typical organizational conditions, that is, with the assumption that the outcomes of their behaviors and decisions are ultimately unknowable and that there are, as John Sununu observes, "changes and inputs that you either have no control over, or in fact, can't identify."[9]

The questions and alternatives raised subsequently have not been genuinely addressed, but all conflict and discussion has ceased. As a manager, should one conclude that staff has reached a point of acceptance toward the implementation? This is an understandable reflex, even when the manager is perceptive enough to realize that unresolved issues have been suppressed. Harvey identifies many behaviors that are indicative of the Abilene Paradox.

It is well known, at least by good managers, that the outcomes of our behavior are not knowable. Hence, it takes courage to make decisions and to act and implement. Many employees so empowered suffer from an inability to do so, a condition Harvey refers to as "action anxiety." Managers suffer from this as well.

Harvey notes that fear of separation is a common concern among employees of an organization. Indeed, it is a common concern among humans in all circles. Being ostracized from a family or social group is too unbearable to contemplate for all but the most committed misanthrope. So, too, the work organization is an immensely powerful attraction for the individual employee. Part of the culture of the organization is designed to cultivate commitments from employees, which encourage them to contribute to the healthy maintenance of the organization. Employees fear being terminated–for the economic impact it will have on their lives, but also because it strips them of a layer of their identity. Therefore, employees conform, to a greater or lesser extent, to the prescribed parameters of acceptable behavior. By moving beyond these parameters, even to express ideas and opinions that might prove useful to the organization, one runs the risk of being separated (if not actually terminated) from the conforming group.

Leadership problems are caused by both managers and those managed. They may sometimes be defined by unrealistic expectations or misplaced blame (often linked, the former leading to the latter), for example, when we want the leader to both steer and row, then complain when we feel left out of the process. The simple fact is that employees have expectations that they want their organization to fulfill, often regardless of whether these expectations are in any way related to the mission of the

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organization. Indeed, in any given organization, employees are at different stages of personal and professional growth or stagnation, different levels of competence and recognition, callowness and experience, enthusiasm and jadedness, willingness and lethargy. All of these attitudes feed into employee expectations for the organization.

Entire divisions or departments can take on characteristics of the individual. Many talents and skill sets are waiting to be developed, exploited, or recharged. However, a lack of coherent dialogue between management and employees can lead to a dearth of willingness to expose these talents and skills. And a lack of faith, for lack of a better word, in management's intentions, capabilities, or ethics dooms any organization's quest for excellence. By utilizing some formal personality and preference inven-

tory, combined with a collective organizational assessment based on intradivisional and interdivisional discursive processes, leadership can begin to identify and focus on what matters to the organization by determining what matters to and is understood by its individual employees (and not what is sympathetic to one's own managerial prejudices). In so doing, ownership of or allegiance to an issue cannot be slandered or otherwise easily compromised, and a greater employee "buy-in" is possible.

Plato's Analogy of the Cave and Harvey's Abilene Paradox are two very concrete examples of negative organizational behaviors triggered by inattention to meaningful organizational communication and inadequate accentuation by management of whatever shared goals, beliefs, and culture exist within the organization. The metaphors are also effective ways of seeing through the problems of organizations all the way to solutions.

Lack of awareness of an employee's relationship to the organization is corrosive to collective morale and trust, even as individual employees continue to strive in their individual way for excellence, albeit shorn of a healthy context to model their behavior. Tacit conceptions and understandings are shaped among staff to fill the void created by a lack of meaningful formal and informal communication among the organization strata. These substitute, rather badly, for a shared knowledge and culture. They foster suspicion and passive resistance to stated and implied organizational goals. Lack of managerial awareness of the employee's need for transitional objects exacerbates stress during times of organizational change.

Plato's Cave is an allegory about the stubborn persistence of and loyalty to constructions of reality. These constructions provide comfort to organizations. We learn that the representation of things is nowhere near representing things as they *are*. Some people may have the courage and clarity of vision to see things as they are. However, these exceptional individuals will generally not be believed, as the rest of us have constructed our own representations of reality and cannot cope with the cognitive dissonance engendered by their alternative vision.

And so it is with organizations and leadership. Management often shows an unwillingness to alter its fixed perceptions of reality, and this limits the ability of an organization to enact substantive change. Have managers seen beyond the shadows? If not, then what gives them credibility when making policy decisions? If managers cannot convince staff that they have a larger and more eloquent vision for the library, then there is nothing granting them special leadership status in the eyes of employees.

To expand on the Cave analogy, management can indeed be chained to notions of library function and performance based on what their shadows reveal to them and

how they choose to interpret them amongst themselves. Without "walking the floor" regularly, or participating in public service activities and mingling with staff, it is astonishingly easy to misconstrue patron and staff attitudes toward the library and very easy to mistrust the impressions these groups draw from their activities in the library.

This brings us to Behn's first managerial "move": creating a mission for the agency. Behn argues that a mission "establishes an agency's moral imperative." It argues to a variety of audiences what the purpose of the organization is. One of those audiences is, inevitably, staff. A mission is not just a gentle shower of words duly recorded and filed away. To staff, it can "signal what activities are most important." This mission must have resonance, and it can only resonate if the organization's leaders, again, according to Behn, demonstrate through deeds that the mission matters. It can only matter if it reflects the values of the organization.

What then can library employees expect of their managers and their administration? How accountable should they be to employee dissatisfaction? How responsible are they for employee "happiness" and "fulfillment"?

As has been demonstrated, there is no sane reason to expect that management should be privy to all the wants and fears and grievances of the individual employee. Such information does not flow dependably upward (not without the introduction of noise and static) and instead usually resides in small employee cliques or even in individual employees themselves, where it languishes unarticulated.

Even so, basic requirements that contribute to employee motivation and achievement include minimal resources and training to perform required tasks and a clearly articulated explanation of the priorities for the position and how these are anchored to the goals of the organization at large, as well as a regular assessment and renegotiation of goals and assignments as necessary. These are fine as far as they go. But until managers and staff are compelled to share their own relationships with and understanding of the organization in a systematic way and are then encouraged to express and celebrate conflict and dissimilarities, rather than fearfully and morosely manage their agreement, only minor incremental successes can ensue. Robert Axelrod, in *The Evolution of Cooperation*, in talking about the value of reciprocal rather than competitive relationships, makes clear that, in a nonzero-sum world, you do not have to do better than the other actor to do well for yourself.[10] The public library does not have to be a zero-sum universe for its employees or managers.

The shadows in the cave will continue to represent something different for everyone in the organization. No one gets to enjoy the view from outside the cave, and the stories they brought back if they were bestowed such a view would not, in any event, be believed. Hence, constructive conflict will and should exist, and not "managed agreement," which masks honest opinion about organizational decision making. In the postpositivist public library not all views of organizational phenomena are right, but all of them are valid. Recognizing this truth, if there is only one, is immeasurably valuable to managers and the organizations they serve.

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