Unseen Barriers

Robert F. Moran Jr.

You have heard it for years: libraries need to be responsive to a rapidly changing environment. Libraries need an open organizational structure ready to respond with relevant services. In a recent issue of *Library Administration and Management,* Maureen Sullivan repeats this advice: "Leaders of today's libraries face the challenge of creating organizations that are dynamic, customer focused, relevant, flexible, and prepared for continual change."[1]

Although most libraries have improved services and introduced new services, many libraries have instituted change programs, and some libraries have made progress toward a thorough restructuring, most libraries remain closer to the organizational model of the last century than the model Sullivan describes. The changes that have been made are not sufficient. Perhaps the best measure of the changes is the willingness of communities to provide their libraries adequate funding. Unfortunately, we continue to read of the failure of communities to see in their libraries sufficient value to be willing to provide the tax or tuition dollars they need.

If my experience is at all typical, we have certainly tried to change. One of the institutions at which I worked instituted a formal change program, and a second went through two programs. However, the results were inconsequential. The institutions continued unchanged in any substantial way despite the leadership of qualified, capable consultants, and significant resources, effort, and time given to the programs. Reflecting on these experiences in the light of the growing understanding of organizational development and behavior change, I have to wonder whether the failure of these programs was due in large part to the failure to recognize the power of organizational culture as an impediment to change.

The power of unconscious assumptions in the control of day-to-day activity is fascinating. As a resident of a Chicago suburb, I have watched the year-after-year disclosure of government officials' illicit activities. How can it be that after decades of investigations exposing unlawfulness, people in government continue to act similarly and expect, I

Robert Moran (rfmoran@anet.com) is a library consultant.

assume, to get away with it? Are they that stupid? Probably not. Is it arrogance? Probably, but arrogance alone isn't sufficient to explain this behavior in the light of the never-ending exposure and jail sentences. Is it the culture, that set of unspoken and often unconscious assumptions that guide our day-to-day activities? I think so. Hiring relatives, using workers to campaign, and giving bribes were seen as acceptable quite a long time ago. Somehow, these beliefs continue despite new laws and ongoing convictions–the power of unconscious, unexamined assumptions.

Edgar Schein offers this definition of culture within organizations:

> "Culture": a pattern of basic assumptions– invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration–that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.[2]

Over time these assumptions become ingrained and unconscious, and thus difficult to recognize.

It seems that today every business says it is customer-focused; there is often a displayed mission statement saying so. Yet, try to get an employee to bend a little from the rules, and it is quickly apparent that following rules is still most important. Teams are touted, yet how many are different from committees? Institutions seek to reform as learning organizations but continue to look and act in substantially the same manner. It is not coincidental that traditional understandings of authority, responsibility, and reward structures are not consistent with these new ideas. "That's not my job," "That's what he gets paid for," "When the quota is not met, I will get the blame," "That's the way we always did it" whether spoken or thought, are the articulations of long-held understandings. Where traditional assumptions are not challenged, it is unlikely that change will occur.

Kathryn J. Deiss's article, "Innovation and Strategy: Risk and Choice in Shaping User-Centered Libraries," demonstrates the need to identify and evaluate long standing assumptions.[3] After identifying a set of standard modes of

operation critical to organizations' success in the past, she explains how these stand in the way of continued success. These long-standing modes—organizational stability, standards, expertise, effective performance, and certainty—are qualities shown over the years to be necessary for efficient and effective delivery of products and services. They are desirable; they ought not to be weakened. However, each is opposed to a quality necessary for innovation—disturbance, unknown patterns, play, practice, and risk. These latter qualities, which are as necessary for innovation as the former were for success in the past, will be embraced only after the former qualities are evaluated in the light of today's issues and needs. Each assumption has to be brought to consciousness and then analyzed in terms of its importance today. Only in this way can compatibility between stability and disturbance, standards and unknown consequences, expertise and play, performance and practice, and certainty and risk be understood and then accepted.

Government official misconduct is not the only current news story in which organizational culture can be identified as a barrier to change. For example, newspapers have also reported that investigatory panels identified culture as a major obstacle to change in NASA and the FBI. As libraries face the need for substantial change, culture is one of the areas that has to be understood and dealt with. Ideally, it will be addressed in a formal change program. Several are available, including systematic job redesign focused on customer service, quality management, the Learning Organization, and Appreciative Inquiry. Each is sufficiently sophisticated to require direction from an expert consultant.

For a library without the resources and time to undertake a full-fledged change program, identifying and analyzing the unconscious assumptions that make up the library's culture is a place to start.

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