

You Can't Build a Fire in the Rain

Sparking Change in Libraries

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The word *change* often partners with *in opposition to*. At every workshop I give someone asks, "What can I do about staff who resist change?" Similarly, when I ask, "What's your biggest bug about teamwork?" the most frequent response is, "Colleagues who *won't* change."

The cable news coverage from Paris of the youth employment law protest provided several images—some humorous and some irrational—of responses to the *threat* of reform. Like the one of the fractious young man, pants below his knees, mooning the gendarmes, the media, the world. Middle fingers extended, his waving hands were like quotation marks for his clichéd intransigence.

As unlikely as this may sound, the young man's antics evoked a memory of a Palmer House ALA Midwinter Meeting with directors of public services. My enthusing about some new program elicited a wearied response from a peer: "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*" Indeed, "*The more things change, the more they stay the same,*" is near the top of the "Fifty Reasons Not to Change" chart.

We've all been there—the old way of doing something no longer works as well as it once did. Something different is needed, and, being an intelligent workforce, we probably have a good notion about what needs doing. But, as we start exploring the new ideas, like trying to light that fire in the rain, our well-intentioned efforts are swamped by a deluge of rationalizations for not changing. However Promethean our fire, the nay-sayers, the uncertain, and the fearful, drench the sparks of change, until we're left with an ever expanding puddle of doubt—and *no* fire.

Why Does Reform Require a Herculean Effort?

James O'Toole offers an explanation, and a template for explaining opposition. A *dominant ideology* exists within each of us and affects our ability to change.¹ Our cataloging code probably would qualify as a competing dominant ideology—consider how we cling to it while our users (and many librarians) almost exclusively use keyword searching to find books. The fight over "open access publishing" is another example close to library interests. While O'Toole

is talking about fundamental change across wide populations, his theory still provides insights into why we resist change of whatever magnitude. He splits the population into the *Haves* and the *Have nots*.

Haves, those benefiting from the way things are, are unlikely to support change, especially reform that may reduce their perks. The Haves include *Have lesses* who aspire for better but, like many of the Parisian protesters—students with welfare benefits, social networks, and family support—are unwilling to accept the risk and sacrifice that come with reform. In the case of the labor law uproar, these *Have lesses* reject the risk of being fired in the first two years of employment, a concession employers say they need to cover *their* risk and investment to remedy the chronic 20 percent unemployment among the under-25-years-of-age *Have lesses*.

Progressives, another category of *Haves*, support reform, but they too subscribe, if with reservations, to the dominant ideology. They are an interesting group because, to use a library example, some *Progressives* will vote for library expansion bonds or other public goods even if they rarely use the library, since they have other channels for their information needs, including personal budgets to *buy* most any book they want.

Have nots include the many *uninvolved* who, sheep-like, accept the dominant ideology—the way it is. The *Have nots* also feature a working-class conservative group (called *Tories* by O'Toole) who have the most to gain with reform, yet defend the dominant ideology. Tories vote *against* library expansion bonds, even though their families would most benefit from greater information access and opportunity. Only the *Revolutionaries* in the *Have nots* reject the dominant ideology. But, *Revolutionaries* rarely achieve a critical mass for change because the dominant ideology's centrifugal force spins them out to the fringe. Their rejection of the dominant ideology is made moot by the *Haves'* and *Have nots'* aversion to the revolutionary alternative.



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Why Change? Do We Have a Choice About Change?

Each semester, on the first day of my academic libraries class, I read a geology quote:

“Do not trust rocks. A rock resting on the rim of the Grand Canyon may give an impression of strength and permanence but as soon as a man turns his back the rock will resume disintegrating and sneaking off to California.”²

The students readily grasp the metaphor beyond the crumbling rocks—they understand their *campus* is changing, and the academic library is hardly isolated. While not exactly sneaking off to California, the campus library’s role is disintegrating—call it *disintermediation*. My students cope well with what is a historically profound change for libraries (after all, this is a *class*), and our discussion of trends informs subsequent class assignments to envision the academic library ten years out. Invariably they design a merger of “bricks and clicks.”

In my other class, Management, I talk about the Sigmoid curve, the S-shaped curve. It applies to life, as Shakespeare’s *Seven Ages of Man* illustrates entropically, a span from “puking infant” to school boy to life’s work, to “second childishness and mere oblivion.”³

Organizations, and libraries, are on an S-shaped curve. I ask the students, “Where is your current employer on the curve?” A few draw organizations on the upswing, well out of infancy and approaching maturity. Some depict their organizations in a nosedive to “mere oblivion.” Perhaps obviously, the best organizations anticipate the shifts in their business, and make necessary adjustments to catch a new upward curve. Be it a new service, a new product, a new challenge, all serve to reinvigorate the evanescent organization. Businesses that lose money close quickly—their S-shaped curve is greased. Not-for-profit agencies, like libraries, have less of a bottom line to worry about; they are less susceptible to cash flows. Funding agencies that renew our budgets regardless of our “productivity” tend to give us a longer ride on the downward slope, but it is still downward, however imperceptible. Instead of a few years, we may get a decade or two before we bottom out.

Any librarian working in the early to mid-90s had to be aware of what was *not* going on all around them: the numbers of reference questions were plummeting, fewer books were being checked out, fewer photocopies were being made while public printers connected to electronic resources were smoking. And then along came the World Wide Web. Disintermediation was upon us, as it was for most every other service and business.

Back then, we were looking *down* the slope of the S-shaped curve, a dark precipice. How did we respond? Understandably, there was denial. We still hear cautionary tales about the shortcoming of search engines like Yahoo! and Google, and that most users are chronically duped by Internet charlatans. Some librarians regard our students like so many Pinocchio’s easily beguiled by any Fox and Cat

webmaster. Trouble is, the users are not listening any more now than they were a decade ago; instead most are using the Internet in effective and efficient ways, probably better than they used the legacy collections in our libraries.

Have we midway through the first decade of the new millennium caught a new curve, got our *mojo* back, like Apple with its iPod? Have e-mail reference, the information commons, ref-chat, information literacy programs, and our retailed-up, Barnes & Noble look put us on a new upward curve, a new beginning? Have we reinvented ourselves? Or are our new services *augmentations* that do not address the fundamental shift in the way people find and use information? Some claim we have turned the corner, caught a new curve: more students in the library along with increasing numbers of books borrowed. Certainly, this seems to be the case in some public libraries, and I am told it is so in some academic libraries, especially those that have established learning partnerships on previously inaccessible faculty turf. Yet, some academic librarians are less sanguine; they see empty rooms, deserted stacks, and unused, expensive e-resources. Even for those libraries that have budgets to pay for retail ambiance, it is unsettling to note what happens when a magnet service like an information commons moves out of the library: students follow.

How do we spark change in libraries? For much of my career, I believed change was simply what you did—it was intuitive. Like communication, change was too obvious to talk about. The important thing was to act. With some sad experience and mature reflection, I realize one can achieve far more with followers alongside. It was naive for me to think change would happen because it *must* happen for *me*. So, how do you bring others along?

Much has been said about strategies for implementing change. Some are superficial, like swapping out an old name, Circulation, for a new one, Access. Another of my least favorites is the call to reorganize—one embittered soul made up a quote, ascribing it anachronistically to a corporate sounding, first century, Petronius Arbiter: “. . . *we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralization.*” I don’t share the knee-jerk cynicism—nor do I consider all reorganizations wasteful—yet I understand what the unhappy author was talking about. Many reorganizations tend to be in name only, without tangible goals, glossing over fundamental *causes*.

Then there is strategic planning, the reigning model for introducing change in libraries. Strategic planning, honestly and courageously done, has great potential. From reading dozens of library plans, I have to reluctantly conclude that potential is rarely achieved. What I see is a clever strategy to retain the status quo. A friend at a university library told me they were at the conclusion of their strategic plan and that action steps were being written, *exclusively*, by the senior library staff—the Haves. One can only hope there are a few Progressives in the group.

Perhaps no librarian knowingly does this, but, if you want to slow down change—change desperately in need of doing—there’s probably nothing quite like well-orchestrated strategic planning to achieve “an illusion of progress.”

For O’Toole, true reform comes through values-based leadership, led by someone who overcomes resistance to change by virtue of *moral leadership*. Such a leader is persuasive and principled and one who engages followers to arrive at mutually beneficial actions. O’Toole terms this leader, *Rushmorean*, akin to the presidents captured in the mountain’s granite.

There is a change tool available to the values-based leader: the future search. I’ve been involved in planning and participating in a full-scale future search (FS) and in leading a FS at another large library. Both enjoyed a modest success; not seismic, but a shift in perspective that helped galvanize the staff around purpose, goals, and engage them in the decision making to achieve those goals.

The underlying theory behind the FS is that if you get enough good people together, they can decide what needs doing for their organization and then go about doing it.⁴ Envisioning the future is the first step to getting there. The FS includes a large number of *stakeholders*: selected staff *Haves* and *Have nots* along with invited guests, like customers. For the academic library this group would include students, faculty, and board members. (My FSs numbered over sixty participants each.) This mix is the difference maker, because for an intense two days, we sidelined the pecking order, with good and bad ideas coming from all over. Good ideas are supported on their merit and not by the status of the suggestion maker. Invariably, there are enough positive people in the mix to assuage the uncertainty and trepidation some participants—often proponents for the status quo—might be feeling. *Cannot* becomes *can do*.

Most of the first day in a FS is a reflection on the way we were when and how far we have come. This includes addressing (and burying) the mistakes, our *sorries*, and celebrating the *prouds*, our many achievements.

The required rigor shoots up on the second day when the group makes specific choices about resources and tradeoffs—things you will do without—to get to the future. They do this after subsets of participants have described the future in scenarios of their design.

The long list of what is wanted can become like grid-locked strategic planning lists by which we accommodate compromise upon compromise in order to retain the old way of doing things. In both FSs, the lists became a sticking point, where we ran out of time before we reached conclusive steps. However, we did take away a much clearer idea of where we wanted the organization to be. We had not agreed on *how* to get there, or what we would do without, but we had agreed on the end result.

The positive conclusion in one FS was that *connectivity* was all important. And it was pretty well agreed upon, organization wide, that connectivity was replacing the just-in-case model of book accumulation. Everyone now knew—however much it pained some—there was a new model of information provision, one that was not going away. The unspeakable had been uttered.

At the follow-up meeting of many of the original FS participants, we agreed to use existing budgetary resources to make a sizeable down payment on technology. Without knowing it, we had shaken the dominant ideology, and change was underway.

Yes, you *can* build a fire in the rain. It is technically possible to do it without any help. Maybe not on the first try, but eventually a spark will cling to the tinder, smoke, and burst into a flame. Of course, you may be the only one to enjoy it. The best kind of metaphoric fire for an organization is that made combustible with help from your engaged followers. They’ve gathered the tinder, worked with you in delivering a spark, and shelter you and the budding flame from the downpour.

Notes

1. James O’Toole, *Leading Change: The Argument for Value-Based Leadership*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 245.
2. Editor at Time Life Books, quoted in *Readings from the Hurricane Island Outward Bound School*, ed. Alison Murray Kuller, (Rockland, Maine: HIOBS, June 1986), 59.
3. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2. 7. 139–167
4. Robert Rehm et al. *Futures that Work*. (P.O. Box 189, Gabriola Island, B.C., Canada: New Society Publishers. 2002), 196 pp. Includes several cases of the future search with not for profits, along with much practical information about the process.