We Need to Take the Blinders Off

Robert F. Moran Jr.

Thousands of mortgage foreclosures! Red ink flowing from all the major financial institutions! This crisis in the financial markets was not the only distressing phenomena affecting millions of people in 2007. We also heard repeated stories of unsafe toys! Scores of offending companies, thousands of recalled toys, hundreds of thousands of parents disturbed and surprised.

These two upsetting series of events were major news stories at the end of 2007, and for good reason. Millions of people were affected in serious ways. Many faced the possibility of losing their homes; others could not get a loan to purchase the home they had planned for. Many others worried about their economic futures as the stock markets teetered and prognosticators talked of a recession. With regard to toys, the likelihood that a plaything could harm one's children sent worried parents in searches through bedrooms and toy chests.

With so many of our fellow citizens in jeopardy and with implications for almost all of us, concern and surprise was widespread. Concern—Yes. Surprise—Huh! How could anyone have been surprised by these turns of events?

If loans are made to people who have limited ability to pay back, should there be surprise if many don't? Higher rates of return induce mortgage companies to make risky loans with the expectation that the majority of the loans will be paid. A higher failure rate than expected will bring disappointment, but surprise?

Similarly with toys. When I found that the workmanship on a toy I bought from a manufacturer in another country was less than what I found in U.S. products, I was surprised and disappointed. I was disappointed that I did not pay more attention. But should I have been surprised? I bought cheap, and I paid for it.

Do We Act as Though We Have Blinders On?

We often are surprised because we go forward as if we have blinders, as if there are only a few factors to weigh in our decision making. This tendency can cause major disruptions in our lives, professional as well as personal. Consider this description of something that might have happened in the 1990s.

A public library in a medium-size Midwestern city begins a year with high expectations. It has the support of the city administration, a board with little turnover, a history of involvement without undue influence, and a set of successful programs. With this support in place, adequate budgets are certain, and the library administration and staff comfortably focus on daily operations and program development. Then, upon opening her morning paper the library director sees, "Teens Viewing Pornography in the Public Library." As a controversy develops, community support for the library wanes.

If library personnel had foreseen the emergence of this issue in their community and planned without public pressure and the need for immediate action, it is likely that its negative effect could have been reduced. But they did not. They were surprised. But how could they have been surprised? The problem of easy access to pornographic websites had been in the library press and was a topic at ALA conventions.

Sound familiar? If this little story does not resurrect a late-1990s bad memory, it is likely that it can remind of a bad situation for which there were overlooked hints before it exploded into the lives of a library's managers—the appearance of a problem followed by, "Why didn't we see this coming?" "How could we not have been ready?" "Why didn't we keep our eyes open?"

Yes, why didn't mortgagees think about future higher payments? Why did bankers act as though the collapse of the building bubble predicted for a least a couple of years would not happen? With regard to bankers, the most common answer is greed, which clouded rationality. But how about when we, library managers, fail to pick up clues that are there to be seen? The human condition? Too much concern for the short term, for quick results? Paying too much attention to obvious problems? I don't know why we are periodically surprised when we should not have been, but I know it happens and often has a serious negative effect on a library's success.

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What to Do About It?

Experience has shown that it doesn't help to make a personal resolution to be more aware and try harder to keep an eye out for things we need to be aware of as we address problems and as we plan. Our daily workplace behavior is too ingrained to be changed by good intention.

Organizational change, change in the structures that format our workday activity, can assure not only the introduction of a change in the way we act, but also make certain of the repetition necessary to create a new behavior. In this case what is needed are structural elements that will encourage broader thinking as planning occurs and decisions are made.

Traditional organizational elements that provide this benefit include advisory groups. Boards of trustees and boards of advisors provide different perspectives and awareness to decision makers. A more recent regular activity, the scientific assessment of library user interests and needs, is another approach that can broaden decision makers' knowledge of circumstances, which can help or hinder success.

Library meetings offer yet another opportunity to broaden thinking to take into account the full range of activities and phenomena of which decision makers need to be aware. The summation of the knowledge of the staff at the meeting is present to be tapped. A change in the way meetings are structured is needed if this knowledge is to surface. Distinct periods of time for the search for potential solutions to each problem or approaches to a new activity followed by a distinct period for the choice of an action are necessary. Here is a set of rules to govern each of these periods:

- Discussion period
  - During this period ideas are offered but not evaluated. This portion can be described as brainstorming.
  - Clarifying questions are okay. For example, "Why do you think what you are suggesting is relevant?" or "Can you explain your suggestion further?"
  - No evaluation and criticism of suggestions occurs. These are held until the decision portion. Negative words like *no, not, won't,* and so on, aren't used.
  - Broad discussion is encouraged; those not involved are asked for ideas.
  - Openness is encouraged; personal assumptions need to be suspended.
- Decision period
  - Analysis and criticism of the ideas generated in the first portion occurs here.
  - The introduction of problem solutions not identified in the discussion period ought to be avoided. Though a new idea that arises in this portion of the meeting may look tempting, it is unlikely that it is better; it should be considered only if the majority of the group immediately responds favorably.
  - A decision for action is required. The decision may be that more time or research is needed.

Those familiar with the writing of Peter Senge will recognize this as the outline for his dialogue/discussion model for meetings. Senge proposes the model as a crucial element for team development. It is also helpful in broadening knowledge of issues under consideration.

Competition, changing user expectations, and periodic questioning of the value of the library make it even more necessary to avoid being in a position to have to say, "I didn't realize that was happening. If only we had known, we could have reacted more quickly." The methods listed here are straightforward ways to increase the likelihood that over time the full range of occurrences and influences that can affect library success will surface. They increase the time spent looking around, looking beyond the obvious, looking beyond what immediately comes to mind. They broaden the number of people involved in an analysis and thereby increase the likelihood that hidden clues will be noticed. Over time, these structural changes will develop the habit of keeping the blinders off and reduce the possibility of having to say, "How could we have missed that?"