Increasing Investment through Participation

Redoing Workspace Layouts without Tears and Angst

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John F. Kennedy once said, "Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future."[1] Though spoken forty-eight years ago, this quote cannot be more applicable than in libraries at the start of the twenty-first century. Scanning the professional literature, some examples of changes that have significantly affected library workflows and organizational structures include the introduction of virtual reference services; the purchase of shelf-ready materials from vendors; the shift away from print to electronic full-text collections; and the direct delivery of scanned material to the remote computer desktop, consolidation of multiple service desks into redefined service points, the creation of new operational units to support hardware, technology, and Internet-based operations.[2] A secondary consequence of these job changes has been the need to change the spatial and workspace configuration needs, which have led to many challenging office redesign efforts. Bazillion and Braun explain the challenge as "the need to plan buildings that are flexible enough to accommodate a future governed by information technology."[3] This requires assessing and reconfiguring office layouts to better support the needs of library employees in doing their jobs.

Emotional Responses to Change

There are excellent resources available to guide space planning activities in context of changing staff operational and public use spaces. The most definitive contemporary work is the latest edition of *Planning Academic and Research Library Buildings* by Leighton and Weber, which states "adequate accommodations for the library staff are essential for effective service" and includes detailed guidelines for computer workstations and office landscape furniture.[4] Similarly, extensive checklists exist to guide one in conforming to critical details in space planning, such as communications and electrical systems, ADA accessibility compliance, and mundane matters like "adequate space for book trucks at workstations and for their storage when not in use."[5] However, none of these resources address the primary issue of managing the emotional and psychological response of the people most directly impacted by the

redesign, which is an essential consideration in the project's success. Without effective communication and staff engagement in developing the space, the most textbook-planned redesign project can turn into an organizationally destructive event. Avoiding this trap is the focus of this article, which is drawn from the authors' observations and involvement in numerous academic and corporate office reconfiguration projects over the past ten years—the most recent of which were successful major reconfigurations of the Circulation and Technical Services work areas at Texas A&M University (TAMU) in College Station.

That a workstation change can be stressful for staff should not come as a surprise. However, managers who plan the change and have the responsibility of leading the staff as change agents can underestimate the emotional response of staff members who are less change resilient or have strong misgivings about it. Unfortunately, change and stress seem to go hand in hand. Stress can be caused by both emotional and behavioral reactions to change, and they may be conscious or unconscious.[6] Change related to one's work area can be personalized beyond the manager's intent. Underlying beliefs may lead some employees to feel anger, hostility, anxiety, and despair toward the management that is implementing the change. Concern about personal space issues trespass upon a sense of ownership of one's desk or workstation, and the redesign can symbolize a personal loss or violation of privacy.[7] There can also be an emotional response with the perception of being powerless or a victim to the whim of the administration. This response can severely undermine empowerment initiatives, and the willingness to exercise judgment or engage in risk-taking behaviors. Some staff may feel confused by the reconfiguration and perceive a message that they are no longer valued in the organization. Others may become anxious over a perceptive loss of rank, seniority, or status over desk, cubicle, or office size, which could be a logistical barrier if the institution has unionized staff and there are rules regarding titles and inches of desk space.[8] These personalized, emotional responses all lack the clear

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understanding of what is really going on from a business–operational perspective.

According to Bridges, employees facing organizational change go through an internal transition from denial and defiance, to support and commitment.[9] However, the time it takes for each employee to come to support the organizational change differs. Some accept the change immediately while some never accept it. For those employees who struggle to accept a reorganization, it can be a very long and stressful process. Dealing with the logistical planning is easy compared to dealing with these emotional responses. However, the savvy manager can turn a stressful event into a morale building, team-oriented activity by effectively addressing these emotional responses through communication and direct empowerment activities, which is the focus of this article. A manager must always remember: No change can occur without willing and committed followers.[10]

Positive and Negative Communication

Some approaches are designed to fail or at least leave staff distrustful of library management when used in context of contemporary empowered workforce models. Past traditional management models such as Theory X and directive micromanagement do not work in today's self-directed multigenerational workforce, with employee's expectations of having input in workplace decisions. Even in libraries with hierarchical organizational structures, the introduction of collaborative decision making practices, such as total quality management and self-managed teams, have led employees to expect to become more involved in planning and decision-making that directly impacts them.

Using a traditional approach of announcing a staff space reconfiguration plan already defined at a level of minute detail will only reinforce feelings of powerlessness. Also, managers who use this approach underestimate a staff member's ability to figure out what is going on around them and the announcement may serve to validate their fears. By the time the official announcement is made, it may be almost anticlimactic.

A similarly poor way to begin the project is by announcing that an office redesign is going to happen at the same time as announcing a pre-appointed committee to carry out the implementation. The committee will appear to have been hand-picked from the administrative perspective of people that are already supportive of the reconfiguration idea. They may not be representative of the group, and because they were already inclined to support the reconfiguration, they may be perceived as not being open to other's concerns. This is especially problematic if the committee develops its plans in the absence of feedback or input from the other staff members.

It is critical for the success of the spatial redesign that the cause-and-effect relationship of workspace configurations and internal workflow be protected. The office redesign should not be used as a mechanism to force a staffing reorganization that has not already been implemented—or at least openly discussed and planned. Although it can be effective in bringing along some staff that have been slow to adapt to change, the office space reconfiguration should not be used to force staff to suddenly change their work habits. The redesign process is significant enough without being weighed down by reorganization, too. It also makes the initiative appear to have hidden agendas, with the unfortunate result of making staff suspicious of future managerial directives.

Communication is the key to successful change initiative. According to Barnard, the common purpose in an organization can only be achieved if it is commonly known, and to be known it must be communicated effectively in oral language and written recordings.[11] An employee who hears about an office change that directly affects their work areas through rumors before hearing it from their manager will feel left out. Staff should thus be informed to the initiative before measurements are made and inventories are taken. Information passing through "the grapevine" can be detrimental to the project because people can make personalized assumptions about it, which only creates more inaccuracy.[12] Rumor must not have more momentum than factual information, as demonstrated by Smeltzer, who interviewed employees from forty-three organizations undergoing change; his conclusion was that in those organizations where change failed, there was evidence of the existence of rumors.[13]

So how can one effectively combat the rumor mill? Numerous scholars believe that the way to alleviate gossip and uncertainty is to give employees accurate and timely information about the organizational change.[14] A vital first step in implementing an office reconfiguration is to get everyone together in a meeting to see and hear the same message from the organizational change managers. During this first meeting, it is critical to be honest and detailed about the reason for change and how it can be expected to affect the employees. Admitting to not knowing all the answers is better then guessing at possible outcomes or saying "I can't tell you that right now." In DiFonzo and Bordia's case study CorpA, they discuss ineffective change communication strategies. In this case study they demonstrate how uncertainty, bitterness, loss of team morale and productivity developed among employees that were directly attributable to a "don't talk 'til you've got all the facts" management approach to organizational change. According to the case study it was obvious that the "don't talk" rule was worse for employees than communicating partial knowledge or admitting to not knowing. According to the case study, one manager in CorpA became aware of a drop in the efficiency of an employee who was acting in response to her manager's "don't talk" performance. According to the manager:

I could see her "off" from the team about two weeks prior to the announcement. . . . She probably felt like we knew what was going on, and we weren't talking to her about it, so that puts both parties in a very difficult situation because I know our supervisor did feel torn . . . and wanted to say "we know that you know," but her participation decreased greatly.[15]

This supports Barnard's theory that anything perceived to be less than sincere may serve only to disturb employees and make them less likely to be cooperative during the change.[16] It is important to head this off from the start by addressing the issues in a way that makes a personal connection to the individual's needs.

During the first meeting, personalize the problem and refer to recent requests individuals have made about addressing workflow or logistics problems to stress continuity of purpose. Point out problems at an individual level and say "have you looked at her/his space, it is so small that she/he can't move around in their cubicle" but quickly point out the reconfiguration offers a solution and indicate where the new space is going to come from. For example say, "acquisitions has so much unused space that space can easily redivert to help out our fellow colleagues."

It is important during this introductory meeting that the manager encourage the idea that communication is a two-way street and that employees need to share their concerns and ideas. Managers need to stress that they do not hear rumors and if employees don't come to her or him about concerns then the manager cannot address the problem. Also, during this first meeting, it is crucial to share the mechanism of how information and input will be communicated between administration and employees. The mechanism that will be used to facilitate communication should be tailored to the needs of the employees. This communication mechanism should encompass different communication methods and include individual meetings between the manger and each employee so that individuals will feel like they had the opportunity to express their concerns and ideas about the change. In addition, the mechanism should also include workflow group meetings that discuss organizational change concerns. These one-on-one and group meetings should lead to increasing buy-in to the organizational change and can also help to identify people that are going to need more personal attention to understand the project. During this first meeting and future one-on-one and group meetings, managers need to be respectful of the employees' feelings and have patience in restating facts in multiple contexts, while also remaining firm in respect to the change objective.

One very critical point that the manager needs to express during the initial meeting is the project timeline. This timeline must have some milestones and a completion date that allows the employees enough time to become invested in the project, but not so much time that the proj-ect loses momentum or other projects overtake it in importance. A sense of urgency is a motivator, but not when employees have too little time to accept and contribute to the project. An example of this from a technical services redesign was when the manager stressed the completion date for the first phase of the project (two months). One person in the group raised the question, "What is the hurry?" The project manager quickly engaged the rest of the group with the question, "Does anyone else believe that this is happening too fast?" The group quickly said "no." The manager went on to stress that it was only the first phase of the project and that if we take too long the project will not be completed, in order to give additional context to the first question.

The timing of the project is important in order to allow for different learning curves among employees. Similarly, it is important to embark on a project of this magnitude during a period that staff can devote the time and energy to engagement. For example, the manager should try to pick a time in the employees' schedules when work is less intense or deadline focused—between holidays, during intercessions, and so on. From the technical services office reorganization example, the change manager consciously decided to assign the deadline for "phase one" of the project to be completed on December 15. This date was chosen because it was well into winter holiday when the staff was not as bogged down with work so that they could spend time and focus on the task of reorganization. If the date of January 21 was chosen, then the staff would not have been able to focus on the change because they would be busy with new material to support the spring classes. A similar midsummer timing, which is customarily a less-demanding period, was used for the circulation office redesign. Delegating responsibilities to an already busy staff can seem like additional work, or that it is perceived they have extra time. This will also allow change-resistant staff to focus on their regular assignments. In any event, to avoid being perceived as less than honest, do not give the staff an opportunity for input at a time when they are too busy to direct time toward it.

One additional aspect that needs to be discussed during this first meeting is the process of formal evaluation that will take place once the project is completed. This evaluation can reassure that follow-up will occur. It can be as simple as a punch list created by the employees on problems they see in their area that need to be fixed. Follow-up can include a feedback mechanism, such as an anonymous survey, which could be e-mailed out to the employees and would cover questions like: what worked and what didn't work, satisfaction with the change and communication do's and don'ts. The change manager should indicate that the purpose of this follow-up is to give management insight into what worked and what didn't work, and it would also give employees the ability to give feedback to management about how they viewed the change.

The final thing a manager should do during this first meeting is to call for the formation of a leadership team.

The approach to forming this leadership team is to allow each workflow group to select (or nominate) an individual to be its leader and spokesperson. In this capacity it can be helpful to give the group some guidelines for choosing leaders, for example, individuals who interact with others must be able to lead a discussion, be open-minded, not be defensive about their ideas, contribute their ideas and be receptive to others, and keep a record of the ideas that the group generated. It would also be important for this person to have an understanding of basic ergonomics and the ability to interpret a two-dimensional drawing into a three-dimensional space.

When the first meeting is over, the manager should follow the meeting with a memo or an e-mail to all employees reiterating the content and discussion items to clarify what change is about to occur and what the employee's role will be. These may be the manager's notes or formally recorded minutes, but the memo provides a common point of discussion and a way to settle differences over what people might remember later. The names of the employees who will make up the representative leadership and the appointed formal operational team, like the management team, should be listed.

Soon thereafter, the manager will want to begin the second round of meetings to reinforce the organizational change message that was stated in the first meeting and put this message on a more personal level toward individuals. The second round of the communication strategy centers around meeting with each individual from the different workflow teams to identify relevant rules and checklist items such as ADA requirements, staff cubicle size and layout options, power and data needs, and the criteria to be used in locating individual work areas. The manager must continuously focus on workflow needs, rather than employees' perception of ownership of space. It is also important to consider some basic psychological preferences, such as people are generally more comfortable facing out so they can see someone coming into their areas. This is where a manager can foster the sense of partnership with the individuals. It is during these individual meetings that the silent or shy employee is given the opportunity to ask questions and voice concerns about the organizational change without being overwhelmed by group dynamics or peer pressure. According to Ryan and Oestreich's study, one of the common reasons why employees remained silent when they faced organizational problems was that they feared negative repercussions if they did speak up.[17] These individual meetings give the employee the opportunity to voice concerns privately.

This second set of meetings also shows employees that management is supportive and committed to the changes as a priority. According to Covin and Kilmann's study on the perceptions of impacts on change, visible management support for change is seen by employees as key to the success of the organizational change. According to the study, these visible supporting managers are viewed by their employees as responsible and credible leaders who are acting as role models for their employees.[18]

Once the individual meetings are complete, the manager should then begin the third and final round of meetings with operational groups or workflow teams. This allows for personal, task-oriented communication between the manager and the employees, and also shows that the manager is taking proper steps to opening the lines of communication at different levels. Meeting with groups demonstrates that the reconfiguration is being driven by the workflow. Communication at this level of magnitude must be consistent, avoiding complications that arise when information is presented differently to different groups.

In summary, the steps for communication during a reconfiguration initiative are reiterated as follows. In the first stage, the change manager should be meeting with everyone—as a group—who is affected by the organizational change and honestly spell out to them the reason for the change. This meeting should identify the problems and spell out the solution, all the while encouraging open communication, standing firm to a timeline, and formulating the leadership team. The second stage of communication is when the change manager meets with each individual affected by the organizational change and personalizes the change. These individual meetings allow the employees to voice concerns and give their input into the change. The third stage of communication occurs when the change manager meets with the operational groups or workflow teams to show that the reorganization is being driven by workflow. Depending on the complexity and magnitude of the changes, it may be necessary to hold more than one actual meeting for each stage of communications.

Empowerment

The next step in managing successful office reconfiguration is empowerment, allowing your employees the ability to have a say in the organizational change, to make the changes themselves, and commit to organizational change.[19] Piderit states, ''as status differences erode employees are coming to expect involvement in decisions about organizational change.''[20] To empower employees, the manager must delegate. Some managers who are accustomed to a more hierarchical administrative perspective might doubt an employee's ability to engage on this level of decision-making. As evidenced in the circulation reconfiguration, one staff member with extensive online gaming experience converted hidden talents as a set designer into office layout expertise. The positive effects participative decision-making has on morale and personal pride in accomplishment create superior service and increasing cost savings.[21] The manager also benefits by countering any perception of being a micromanager.

Due to employee's increasing expectations for involvement in organizational decision-making; successful reor-

ganizations are increasingly tied to individual employee support and belief in the need for proposed changes. Consequently, although the workflow group selects (or nominates) an individual to be its leader and spokesperson on the leadership team, these individuals may be resistant to the organizational change. The manager must identify those individual employees who have accepted the initiative and are moving toward the needed change. These employees will be the ones who will influence others within the organization, particularly the ones who have not made up their minds about the change, to see the advantages of the reconfiguration.

One issue that change managers must be alerted to is when certain employees dominate other staff members in an attempt to get their own way. The manager needs to remind the employees about the objectives of the organizational change on a regular basis, especially if the group is to truly focus on workflow efficiency rather then prior experience. One way of reminding the employees to stay true to business operational needs is to have those individual employees who are accepting the change initiative to work with resistant staff members. This additional one-on-one peer facilitation, which was used during the redesign of the workflow area of technical services at TAMU libraries, gives the change-resistant employee an individual to talk to about change concerns. It also gives the manager the ability to reinforce the reason for the change to the change-resistant employee by proxy without actually coming across as a micromanager.

Providing tools such as floor plans, furniture cutouts, or floor planning software training to help employees to redesign the space according to their workflow needs is part of the empowerment process. This shows employees that the manager is sincere when he or she requests their input. According to Nixon, it also gets the group thinking about the space redesign in a required strategic direction.[22] If employees need training to use the software, the manager should consider designating or hiring someone who has those skills to work with each group since some employees may find the software an obstacle. Even so, the low-tech options, such as a printed floor plan and a box of crayons, or a printout of the empty floor plan and furniture out of semi-adhesive paper can be sources of inspiration. One creative solution used in the Circulation reconfiguration was to tape the floor plan to a metal cash box or desk drawer slider and then back furniture pieces with adhesive-backed craft magnets. All of these methods will allow a better visualization of how the entire workspace comes together while allowing exploration of different options.

Once the employees are given the necessary tools, they should be encouraged to have informal gatherings to discuss the progress of the floor redesign. During these gatherings, they might put options up for a vote on everything from where the door to their area will be to placement of file cabinets for shared use. If there is an inconclusive vote, discuss the reasons and offer options to

try and get to a unanimously positive response. Sometimes it might be necessary to defer an actual decision pending follow up with individuals to make sure their concerns are met, then to bring the group back together. Encourage the use of group facilitation techniques to bring even the ideas or concerns of less vocal persons into the open. As Harquail and Cox note, a pluralistic organization appreciates and benefits from the diversity of its employees by encouraging them to express their multiple perspectives and opinions.[23] However if employees are shy or feel they are not able to speak up, then an organization will never achieve pluralism.[24]

Although empowering employees is important, it does not mean that the manager is done when she has delegated tasks to the employees. The manager must stay in touch with developments to catch problems early in the project planning, before the design is completed. One problem that managers need to catch is how employees place themselves inside their cubicles. For example, think about preventing the situation where a staff member who has a more carrying voice and whose job requires her to be on the phone extensively is located adjacent to a staff member who is easily disrupted. This would create a perpetual problem for the manager with the employees sniping at each other and is best caught early to prevent eventual morale issues within the workplace. To stay in touch with the employee's plans it may be necessary to meet at least weekly with each group to see how their ideas are progressing. Although time consuming, weekly meetings will help motivate employees and keep them thinking about the project. The manager can also use these weekly meetings to demonstrate active participation in the project, thus building a stronger alliance between the manager, group leaders, and employees.

Another reason to monitor the progress of the project is to ensure that each area being redesigned is complying with non-negotiable regulations such as federal ADA requirements for aisle width and door width, or fire regulations such as fire extinguisher clearance and seeing/hearing enunciators. The change manager must also deal with logistical issues, such as planning for the appropriate number of phone and fax lines, power and data port availability, and completing requests to get the necessary equipment. Change managers cannot be afraid to tweak plans in response to group recommendations; however, these should be kept to minor issues. If a major adjustment is needed, then the group should reconvene to assess the impact and make appropriate recommendations. Office reconfiguration plans are a work in progress and will need to change to meet the needs of the organization, or in response to evolving circumstances.

When things go wrong, managers must not blame the employees for problems with the plans, lest they cause negative morale issues and resentment. The manager is the ultimate person responsible for the final decisions or addressing unforeseen problems. The challenge, then, is to guide the team back on course without being viewed as

micromanaging or having overridden staff recommendations. That said, it is important to expect that something will go wrong. A major office reconfiguration is a complex project, and no matter how many eyes have studied a plan, it often looks different when the desk is physically in place.

Once the groups have signed off on the reconfiguration plans, the manager must present the plans to the organization. It is important that the same open communication be maintained at this end stage of the process. Two things need to happen during this presentation for the project to be a success: (1) reminder to the group why the change needed to occur, what the objective of the project was, and praising those who helped reach the objective; and (2) to focus on a positive future. These can be reinforced by having the participants themselves deliver part of the presentation or to answer questions of space needs and workflow requirements. However, it is not the time for last resistant holdouts to start trying to turn the question-and-answer session into a cross-examination, so the manager must be prepared to intervene if necessary as a facilitator.

During the construction and installation process, it is critically important for the manager to be present. This presents the manager with the chance to learn about problems as soon as possible and be on the spot to make decisions. Being present also demonstrates respect for the employees who see their manager doing the kinds of things they are being asked to do. Another benefit is to be able to encourage employees who might be having difficulty. Even though there is buy-in for the new configuration, the actual saying goodbye to something comfortable can be difficult. An encouraging word, pat on the shoulder, or even a ready tissue can help an emotional employee keep from getting bogged down and stay focused on the future improvements.

Follow Up with Evaluation

After the new configuration is installed, keep communication lines open and allow room for evaluation and adjustments to be made to the changes. Certain details that cannot be predicted from a two-dimensional, static perspective will undoubtedly surface. For example, some individuals may wish to move their desks to the other side of their cubicle to be farther from an air conditioning or heating vent, or someone may discover that a window causes glare on the computer screen. Faced with these kinds of issues, new options may need to be considered and managers must address these issues in order to have a successful completed project. To address these issues, management should ask individuals to submit a punch list of problems they believe needs to be addressed and management needs to address these problems in a timely manner. If a punch list item cannot be fixed, this should be explained to the employee and a mutually agreeable compromise found.

Once the punch list issues have been addressed the manager should send out a survey to their employees. This survey should focus on the organizational change, employees' satisfaction with the transform, and the managerial methods used to achieve the change. The survey responses should be anonymous so that employees can feel free to express their opinions safely. The data collected using this survey can help managers identify additional problems not found on the punch list and be used as a learning tool for the manager's next reconfiguration project.

Finally, having a celebratory event at the end declares the reconfiguration a success and allows everyone to feel positive about it. It also presents a public opportunity to thank employees for a job well done. Because so many employees' identities are tied to their careers, when a supervisor shows appreciation it leads to an increase in employee pride and self esteem, a stronger positive relationship between the employee and supervisor, and a reaffirmation to the employees that their efforts are valued by their supervisor and organization. Down the road, it can lead to increased product ability and increased retention within the organization.

Conclusion

This approach for implementing change provides a model that may be useful for other projects. They can be major, such as a workflow redesign, or minor, such as finding a better way to store book trucks. Regardless of the extent of the organizational change, the key points to remember are: communication, empowerment, and follow up with evaluation will lead to a successful organizational change. In addition, one of the most valuable byproducts of this approach is that it brings employees together across an operational area and improves the understanding of what different individuals do and an understanding of cross-organizational workflows.

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