

Harvesting the High Fruit

John Lubans Jr.

My column uses a couple of farming metaphors to describe two levels of positive organizational change: There's low-hanging fruit and there's high-hanging fruit, with the latter presenting a greater challenge to its harvest than the former (see illustration). Prosaically enough, picking fruit on a ladder carries more risk than standing with your bushel basket under the tree. In either case, your harvest is the biblically encouraged "enjoying the fruit of your labors." Any harvest, high or low, gives us good reason to celebrate.

Whence the Low Fruit?

What permits unpicked low fruit to accumulate in the first place? What leads us to coexist with inefficiencies—even to defend them? Some of it is inherent in the library's bureaucratic culture—one that seeks to increase in size and complexity often for reasons unrelated to productivity. When I assign my management class Cyril Northcote Parkinson's essay on his law—"work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion"—the students are often incredulous—finding it hard to believe the law applies to libraries, or even in government, which is where Parkinson found bountiful real evidence of its occurrence. Akin to the students' incredulity—perhaps aiding and abetting it—is the practitioner's notion that everything we do in libraries is good and therefore should flourish as an accepted practice.

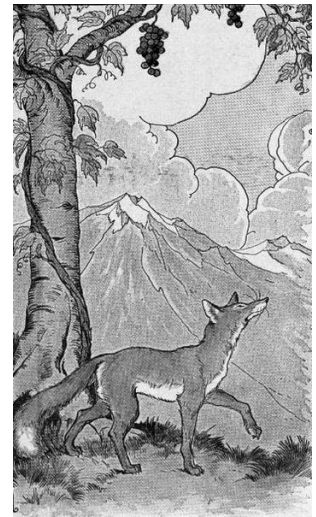
For example, many librarians viscerally believe that information—any information—qualifies as worthy of preservation. They promote this primary duty as a professional obligation and make the "just in case" argument that one day a scholar may need this information and absent it, the fate of the intellectual world may well be diminished. This type of fact-free thinking is akin to Nicholson Baker's 1994

New Yorker exposé of libraries junking card catalogs. His "Discards" stirred latent emotions and much *tch, tch, tch*-ing among many readers, including librarians.

Most of the time, our reluctance to harvest the ripe and ready fruit is caused by organizational inertia: our unwillingness to question the status quo. We know where the inefficiencies are lurking but we lack the will or the status to push for change. Often, this is because in promoting change we may be viewed as troublemakers by colleagues who are content with the way things are—indeed, they

believe the way it is *is* the way it should be. They caution us with clichéd adages such as *let sleeping dogs lie*, *if it ain't broke don't fix it*, and *don't rock the boat*. Or, as in the above illustration of the fox and grapes, we rationalize our inability to get to the high fruit and claim it is not worth the effort; besides the benefits of getting to the high fruit are overstated—it is easy to dismiss what you decide not to pursue. Indeed the "fruit" can become invisible to us since through familiarization we may cease regarding the situation as inefficient. What was inefficient (and still is so to any reasonable outside observer) has now become business as usual!

Regardless of our success in harvesting the low fruit, getting to the high-hanging fruit in our metaphoric orchard may well present a new set of challenges. Library organizations are no more immune from antisocial behaviors (e.g., envy, apathy, pride) than any other organization. When we permit this behavior to run its course—wrecking our *esprit de corps*, camaraderie, and good support of each other—we can find ourselves back at square one, to the way we were—



"I'll bet they're sour!" Illustration by Milo Winter (1919), from *The Aesop for Children*.¹



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all to our detriment. A leadership change can make for a reversal of direction in the library's fortunes. When the previous leader has made good progress on change initiatives, the organization's power elite will want to reestablish organizational equilibrium—a sort of middle ground. To achieve that, the ruling elite predictably chooses a status quo leader rather than someone to build on the previous leader's energy and vision. Any remaining momentum quickly grinds down and frequently stalls. Tragically, the new leader may soliloquize on why the staff is not more proactive!

In a queer case at one organization, a new leader was hired with a tacit understanding to reverse course, and to subtly punish and ostracize the people most influential in bringing about change. When this happened, we found that the new "inner circle" was now composed of those who most impeded the former leader. Due to the new regime's lack of openness, staff at all levels were left to discern for themselves the new direction of the organization. This in-the-shadows sifting and sorting of relationships led to some mid-level leaders being strangely out of step with their peers; while others, more adept, quickly reverted to the old ways.

Or, in another scenario, a new leader comes on board and while many of the people who were instrumental for positive change are still in place, and want to keep improving, the new leader may not have the skills—or the desire—to turn people loose, to enable them to harvest the high fruit, to move upward from the achieved plateau.

When the leadership does not change, boredom can be the most serious threat. After years of bushwhacking through the impeding thickets to the low fruit, we get tired. The next level up may exceed our and the leader's energy. Along with the leader, followers may settle into ennui, we may plateau and stay in place. Or, a leader who thrives on fresh challenges may turn to other interests, sometimes outside the library. To prevent this, the library needs to work its way past the stalling point to find ways of introducing energy and zest into the leadership mix. Taking turns at leading might be one way to do this, but this can only happen in the most open organizations where leaders are free to cycle in from project to project. In my experience our failure to reflect and celebrate what had been achieved was a lost opportunity to recharge, to reassess. It would have been good to call a halt and take time to think about where we had been, where we were now, *and* where we wanted to be next. Then, achieving the next level could have become the organization's new challenge.

Getting to the High Fruit—Steps on a Ladder

What happens after the low-hanging fruit, there for the taking, is harvested? As already stated, getting to the high-hanging fruit presents more of a challenge. The high fruit is protected by user groups, by staff advocates (many who resisted the low fruit harvest), by technology, and by professional mystique.

To get to the high fruit, we will need to be more inventive, to take more risks, to be even more resourceful and resolute than we were in pursuit of the low fruit.

One way organizational theorists describe organizational change is through a "thaw and freeze" prism. To introduce change, we thaw the old, hardened, frozen organization—make it fluid. We introduce change. Then we refreeze the organization.

The refrozen organization immediately becomes set in its ways—formalizing its structures and communication, it has little choice in the matter.

How do we avoid the ice age? How do we stay limber and maintain momentum to keep ideas flowing? How do we pump antifreeze into the organization? In addition to the thaw-and-freeze prism, we can view change as an S-shaped curve. I've mentioned this curve in previous columns, including one in which I had this to say about a very real and significant drop off in reference questions across libraries in the profession:

The decline . . . was akin to an S-shaped curve on which we had passed the happy upward years of long lines and never ending demand. Now, we were slipping downward into a quaint inutility unless we reversed the trend with another, upward curve.²

How does an organization create an upward curve when gravity exerts its own inexorable downward momentum? One way to prolong the upward momentum is getting to keep what you save. If your good idea saves money, you get to keep the money and use it in another area, to help along a new idea, to start a new initiative. In one of my jobs, we got to recycle dollars saved in the department. Because of the large department size, we found ourselves investing in other areas in the library. Sharing our good fortune led to remarkable, greatly positive changes for many areas of the library and its users. And, the cash benefits silenced the critics—those reluctant to change—at least for a few years. Unfortunately, when a fiscal urgency (that is, a budget cut—what else is there these days?) forces long-delayed consolidations or rearrangements, there is no money to redistribute. We may survive out of necessity but we are the poorer for it. Any gain is surrendered to the budget office and the dollars cut are gone forever from the bottom line. We then circle the wagons and await the next fiscal assault.

While circling the wagons may be our natural inclination, I propose we regroup and reflect. Take the time to review what has been achieved and celebrate those achievements. Okay, I don't see us high-fiving over a "successful" budget cut, but perhaps some good will come of it, perhaps the crisis will pass and good times are just around the corner. Take the time now to talk about and plan for the next high adventure. Group goals help and knowing what is in the way, what the barriers are will make the next push less uncertain.

Overall, your organizational climate will either facilitate improvement or not. Libraries with the following cultural characteristics are more able to sustain an improvements-seeking mindset, more able to introduce change, more able to reshape services to fit new information models than those that operate under the mirror image—the opposite—of these characteristics:

- **Administrative control is loose.** There is an inherent trust in the staff’s capacity to do what is right, without being micromanaged, supervised closely or extensively reviewed.
- **Decentralized decision making is favored.** Decisions are made quickly and promptly at the point of need. If others are involved, they are included either before or after the decision. If the decision is a bad one, it is reversed—with no loss of face—and something better put in its place. Experience gained from a bad decision is better than no experience from a delayed decision.
- **Action taking is preferred.** When a group or individual takes action on behalf of the user or on behalf of staff, it is done within administrative trust. If the action needs to be improved, it is. Experience gained from taking action—even when wrong—is much preferred to delaying action until all options have been explored and resolved and all permissions gained.
- **Innovation is favored.** Keeping up with the Joneses is not a particularly desirable way to introduce innovation. Just because Library X has a “Learning Commons” does not mean that your library must have one. It may, but your rationale should be based on need—as you understand it—not incremental imitation or an architect’s telling you must have it.
- **Impromptu planning.** Spur-of-the-moment (quick-turn) adjustments are practiced. Planning for planning’s sake—as in most strategic plans—is less favored over the ability to quickly adjust services and policies. A straightforward cyclical evaluation model: *Plan, Do, Check, And Act* guides the organization.³
- **Mistakes are encouraged.** A zero-defects philosophy is recognized as impossible and not especially valuable to your library’s service mission. Erring while working to help a user is not a bad thing since we learn from the mistake and adjust, while the user values our efforts to help. To delay helping someone because we fear making a mistake is bad for business.

Similarly, John Kotter, the leadership theorist, describes what the best leaders do to confront change and develop new upward curves toward the high-hanging fruit:

- Establish a sense of urgency
- Create a guiding coalition

- Develop a vision and strategy
- Communicate the change vision
- Empower broad based action
- Generate short-term wins
- Consolidate gains and produce more change
- Anchor new approaches in the culture⁴

Kotter’s “guiding coalition” is essential for a sizeable organization to move forward, to keep the organization from relapsing or plateauing. The coalition has to share with all staff a vision as to what is happening. Only then can leaders have those quintessential conversations with users and staff about the future. When that happens users and librarians can come together to, as Kotter puts it, “communicate the change vision” and collaborate on a future. Be aware that you may not be able to bring everyone along while going for the high fruit. Some groups will have to wait—don’t squander energy on them until they are ready to embrace change. Instead, focus your efforts in areas where reform is embraced and underway. Work on how to keep this momentum going, going for the high fruit, instead of trying to bring everyone along. “Empowering broad based action” is probably the most important ingredient in Kotter’s recipe. When leaders are in agreement on what needs doing, they can let front line staff experiment, try out ideas, and discover by doing. When leaders empower followers in a genuine way, then followers can act.

Many followers in an intellectual industry like ours have good ideas, so if they are overtly encouraged to follow through, then staff-sponsored change initiatives can take place. If for example we desire to reinvent reference, how does a genuine reinvention occur *within* reference? Have you got your extension ladder handy? Those grapes Mr. Fox claims are sour are actually the sweetest and juiciest ever!

References and Notes

1. Printed in *Aesop, The Aesop for Children*, illus. Milo Winter (Skokie, Ill.: Rand McNally & Co., 1919), www.gutenberg.org/etext/19994 (accessed July 20, 2009); illustration reprinted from Wikimedia Commons, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Fox_and_the_Grapes_-_Project_Gutenberg_etext_19994.jpg (accessed July 20, 2009).
2. John Lubans Jr., “I Can’t Find You Anywhere but Gone’ Revisited,” *Library Administration and Management* 22 no. 4, (Fall 2008): 205–207, 220.
3. Kaoru Ishikawa, *What is Total Quality Management?* trans. D. J. Lu (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1985).
4. John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Bus. School Pr., 1996): 161–73.