Peer Coaching in the Post-Departmental Library

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Recently, I went to Italy to take part in an International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) satellite conference in Bologna. It was my first trip there. One of my in-flight readings was Luigi Pirandello's absurdist *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. [1] Apropos of Mr. Pirandello's tragicomedy, my column has four questions in search of an answer:

1. What is post-departmental?
2. Why peer coaching?
3. How is the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra relevant?
4. How is the Peer Coaching Institute relevent? [2]

My conference presentation touched on the nebulous notion of a post-departmental library. I asked participants to draw, with crayons and paper, a representation of an ideal organization, something to symbolize *their* ideal workplace.

Most of the pictures were circular in shape. Likewise, when I ask library school students to do this type of drawing, they often come up with circles. Their representations, like those of the IFLA participants, are idealistic, fluid, often team-based, inclusive, and highly egalitarian—dense with communication channels. To be sure, some students keep the hierarchy and the boss—they are the Darwinists among us—but most want something with a bigger slice of the responsibility pie, something that involves and includes them in decision making *and* doing the job. They want to feel good while on the job—radiant smiles and beams of sunshine almost always appear in their drawings—and, they want to be part of something productive; they want results!

Before I give the impression that changing a rectangle into a circle is all it takes for a corporate transformation, it's worth a mention: the shape of an organization means little unless there's a corresponding culture of working

The street sign for the Via Urbana set high into the ancient wall of the *Collegio di Spagna* in Bologna, Italy, suggests an enduring past (since 1488) and an accommodation of the modern. Taken by John Lubans Jr., midday, August 22, 2009.

with each other. Think of which came first: the hierarchy or the boss–worker hierarchical culture? Think of all the reorganized libraries that continue their ways unchanged regardless of the revised organizational chart.

The Post-Departmental Library

More than two decades ago, I envisioned scrapping a library's hierarchy, literally tossing out the old ways of working. This epiphany—my colleagues saw it more as

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The Biblioteca Sala Borsa. Bologna's spectacular, newly restored and renovated public library sits on history, literally. The first floor's clear glass tiles reveal Roman ruins beneath. More recently, the building was a corn exchange and a basketball court! Now, it is a heavily used and highly fluid library. I took this photo at around 10 a.m., with droves of people waiting for the service desks to open. Taken by John Lubans Jr., midday, August 18, 2009.

derangement—dawned on me while I was helping implement self-managing teams in a research library. We flipped departments into teams; we went from boxes to circles. What we came up with was a new, post-departmental organization—at least on paper. Why did we go with circles? Because of the circle's implied inclusiveness, just like what the Bologna participants drew. We hoped to tap into the creative resourcefulness of each and every staff member. Our thinking was that we had an intelligent staff and they should be part of our decision making—the circles symbolized for us, as they still do for library science students, a two-way inclusion.

In the technical services circle where I spent most of my time, and where the people were the most amenable to change, we reached high productivity goals; goals thought impossible in previous change initiatives. And, having gained the mountaintop, with the staff leading the way, we looked for higher mountains to scale. Organization-wide, we glimpsed the mother lode of what was possible, but we barely made a dent in the hierarchy. Entrenched resistance came from multiple fronts: the top-down parent organization in which we were regarded (after a new president was installed) as an insurrectionary island; the unclear department head/team leader job descriptions; and the inherently inflexible reward and promotion systems.

Lately, I've seen some movement in more than

a few U.S. libraries toward less hierarchy and more self-management. Even at my former workplace where we once gave full rein to self-managing teams, democratic principles linger. Managers, who might prefer telling others what to do, bite their tongues and promote participatory decision making, with roles for librarians and support staff. To inhibit participation—even the most top-down traditionalist realizes—would be foolhardy and would lead to poorer decisions. As well, a heavy-handed approach would go against the now ingrained expectations of a liberated staff. The departments are still there, but the organization behaves in post-departmental ways.

This greater workplace flexibility—in and out of libraries—has evolved for various reasons—including heaps of positive evidence that greater productivity, innovation, and excellent service come not through hierarchy but through teamwork, especially when teams are *highly effective*. Another influential cause is that many new professionals (librarians included) increasingly demand or expect to have a say in how to do their work. If not, they leave! They prefer leaders to be more hands-off than hovering.

I believe the hoped-for organizational change—the post-departmental library—finally may be underway. But the change is not the wholesale replacement model I'd envisioned. Rather, it appears to be evolving *parallel* to the existing hierarchy—one larger, the other smaller. My research on the conductor-less Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and teams at Southwest Airlines indicates that there is a *business* side and there is a *performance* side to this "new" organization with managers and practitioners behaving in different ways, at the interstices and in their own spheres.

Why Peer Coaching for New Librarians?

The liberation movement at the team or departmental level benefits the new professional. But, freedom has its own requirements of the beneficiaries. Post-departmentalism responds to what they want—a loose-knit arrangement that gives them a still supportive work environment in which to

thrive. However, new skills are required to find one's way in this unfamiliar terrain and to bring others along. If a boss is less important, then who makes decisions and how are these decisions made? Who does the "vision thing?" Who empowers the group? Who accounts for group performance?

New librarians may not have acquired essential collaboration skills in their library science education. What are those specific skills and how do new librarians learn them? Without those skills, the new structure will not work at peak performance; teams will not be highly effective. We may espouse collaboration and teamwork, talk the talk, but if we don't practice those skills, we may wind up with a superficially desirable structure. Members presumably feel better about each other, but get no more—or less—done than in the hierarchy.

Orpheus and Peer Coaching

At first glance an orchestra may be an unlikely source for ideas on how to work in the new organization. After all, is not the symphony orchestra prototypically top-down—a boss with a pointed stick telling workers what to do? Is not the conductor the one and only decision maker? Well, not always, and seemingly less so with a new generation of musicians who are less content with being told what to do. Orpheus is the thirty-five-year-old poster child for post-departmentalism: No conductor! To spread its philosophy, Orpheus is working with student orchestras at the Juilliard and the Manhattan schools of music in adopting Orpheus' seemingly leaderless way of making great music, of making great decisions. The group becomes the decision maker. They pick the music, decide on the interpretation, and they present it. There is no boss; there are twenty-five bosses.

Orpheus musicians coach players in student orchestras as they pursue a semester-long project to produce a conductor-less performance. With Orpheus coaching, the students develop specific self-management and peer coaching skills that help the student orchestra achieve its performance goal. At the end, it is the student orchestra alone on the stage in front of a discriminating audience.

What Orpheus does in coaching new musicians for self-management is applicable to the new librarians in the "new library." Few new librarians have acquired the essential team skills needed for participation in highly effective teams. In my teaching experience students are averse to and disdainful about working on team projects. They tell me they've had nothing but negative experiences in small group work.

The music students are no different. Many are and want to be soloists, but realistically very few can make it *solo*. They know they will have to choose between laboring in Dilbert's cubicle-land or playing in an orchestra. So, these musicians are motivated to put aside their disdain for collaboration in order to find a voice and musical career for themselves. As students learn and practice team and decision making skills guided by Orpheus coaches, they begin to apply these skills when working with their peers:

- collective listening
- time management
- delegation of responsibility
- being prepared
- being proactive
- communication—talking and giving feedback

Collective Listening

While listening actively is not a foreign concept to any professional, it is especially relevant to a musical group that strives to produce a particular sound. At an Orpheus rehearsal at Carnegie Hall, I saw several musicians take turns sitting some thirty rows back to hear the music the way the audience would later that night. Then they'd give feedback to the entire orchestra on how to fine tune the sound. And, while playing, they listen in their own instrumental groups to the sound the other groups make; they seek to balance the overall sound, not just fine-tune their own sound. I observed the Orpheus coaches encouraging the student orchestras in the same way, to step away and to listen, then report back.

Through collective listening, many students gain more confidence in their orchestra role. They may be hearing the complete orchestra for the first time. Imagine that—seeing for the first time the overall purpose of the library not just hearing your section's "music." How does collective listening relate to libraries? Do we librarians have to concern ourselves with "pliant phrasing" as one music critic put it? Perhaps not in the literal sense; what about "pliant phrasing" in a figurative way—the nuances—when we discuss ways to improve?

Well, it's all in the quality of our performance. Do we strive for a "Brava" or a "good enough?" While we may not be on a spotlight lit stage, we still produce something for others to respond to, to learn from, to consume. In my experience, the best library products, the great library performances, come not from happenstance but from an ability among staff to hear the "pliant phrasing" and to design and achieve a superior product, service, or way of working. When I talk with best practices librarians, I find positive attitudes, an openness toward different approaches, bosses who encourage experimentation, and truly empowered staff who are recognized for their achievement. Nor are staff fearful of punishment for mistakes they may make along the way. In best practices libraries, communication is robust, but proactivity does not wait upon seals of approval from every sector.

Time Management

Absent the boss, it becomes incumbent for the group to manage time. The self-discipline that occurs among musicians on a time budget, with a performance deadline, can be of great value to new librarians. This discipline adds focus with a trade-off: the individual may have to settle for less than what he or she wants, but at least you will have a product and probably a very good one. And, you will learn to be succinct.

Delegation of Responsibility

Student musicians learn to assign people to keep track of time, to schedule rehearsals, to consider tempo, dynamics, and to track achievement and progress toward the performance date, the deadline. None of these details can be left to chance for a musical presentation, any more so than when a library team develops a new service plan. One music student complained to me: "No one's in charge." That's the same criticism I heard about so called leaderless teams in libraries. But there is someone in charge—the students, the team members. Once this concept is realized—and integrated in the corporate culture—ad hoc leaders emerge.

Being Prepared, Taking Responsibility

Self-management doesn't work if group members are not prepared. The first rehearsals at both schools of music are usually painful. If the musicians have not prepared thoroughly, the process goes slowly—with a lot of red faces—and everyone knows. The same happens in my classes when several teams present their library budget proposals. The contrast between the teams that have worked hard and well and the teams that have failed to address team problems ranges from faint-hued blushes to finger-pointing blame. Richard Rood, a cellist and Orpheus coach, tells the students ahead of time to come prepared: "Talk and try out suggestions. Come up with some ideas, some opinions, some convictions."[3] He says to them: "The more everyone knows about it, that's the beauty, the influence, the group effort." He advises them to read reviews, listen to CDs, even to read the score—the entire score.

And, lack of preparation inhibits being proactive. If you are unprepared, you will (unless delusional) not have anything intelligent to say. You can't halt the rehearsal unless you have a better alternative to offer. Obviously, communication—talking and giving feedback—is quintessential. Negotiation might be another way to describe what goes on in an Orpheus rehearsal.

Expressing a contrarian view without offending, is an acquired skill. Most of us have to work at finding words—the *bon mots*—that will have the intended effect. We rarely want people resenting our words and not hearing our suggestion. You only become fluent in disagreeing agreeably with practice, like learning a new language. This is particularly relevant in libraries where we may think too much alike, we have the same mind-set—we may even border at times on groupthink. Given our similarities, it may be more difficult for us to be the contrarian, to go against the tradition, the tacit assumptions, unless we have the skills to defuse the negative response. We may need to assign the contrarian role to assure our assumptions do not go unquestioned.

Southwest's cofounder Herb Kelleher stresses the importance of a culture aligned with coaching:

> In order to make coaching successful, you first have to have the kind of culture that is receptive to it, where people don't feel that they're being criticized. Feedback can be, in the wrong atmosphere, a code for a performance problem. In other words, you're calling it coaching, but what it really is criticism. And good coaches don't coach that way.[4]

The Library Peer Coaching Institute (See Appendix)

Because my talk was to IFLAs Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning Section and the New Professionals Discussion Group, I proposed a way to make concrete some of the ideas discussed in this paper: a Peer Coaching Institute. My initial idea emulates Orpheus. Unlike Orpheus, we do not have a corps of librarians who have refined their coaching skills to the point that they can coach consistently and compellingly. Nor do we have an Orpheus way of working, one that would fit neatly in with the post-departmental library. While some good efforts exist, there isn't one I could actually point to and say, "Follow them!" How do we get this cadre of library coaches, a nucleus like that of Orpheus? How do we demonstrate post-departmental ways of working?

I think an opportunity exists in schools of library and information sciences to inculcate good coaching skills. I propose we establish a peer-coaching institute, where, for a semester, a group of twelve to fifteen students are coached about the how of working together so they can be peer coaches—all the while working on an atypically significant group project. The institute would follow the Orpheus immersion model as used at the Juilliard and Manhattan Schools of Music. For librarians this comes down to designing an assignment, a culture, as equally meaningful for library science students as a conductor-less musical concert is for a student orchestra.

References and Notes

1. Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author and Other Plays* (Twentieth Century Classics), trans. Mark Musa (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996).
2. This essay is based on my talk at the IFLA satellite conference "Moving In, Moving Up and Moving On: Strategies for Regenerating the LIS Profession" CPDWL/New Professionals Discussion Group, Aug. 19, 2009 at the University of Bologna in its ex-Convento di Santa Cristina. In the conference proceedings, article cited as: Lubans, John. "Peer Coaching for the New Library" in *Strategies for Regenerating the Library and Information Profession* ed. Jana Varlejs and Graham Walton (Munich: K.G. Saur, 2009): 126–36
3. I observed Richard Rood's coaching at the Manhattan School of Music on April 2, 2008, and on at least two other occasions. Quotations come from those observations.
4. Herb Kelleher, *The Art of Coaching in Business*, DVD (Baltimore, Md.: Greylock Associates, no date).

Appendix: The Who, What, Where, When and How of a Peer Coaching Institute

Who? A dozen to fifteen library science students work with a sponsoring faculty member (possibly the one who normally teaches the required library management course) and a practitioner librarian coach to select a research project topic for study and presentation of outcomes. The practitioner coach is a librarian trained and certified in coaching techniques. An outside part-time project manager will oversee and facilitate the project, including its evaluation.

What? A semester long self-directed team project—about a real problem or question—conducted by a team (twelve to fifteen members) of library science students with an end-of-semester deadline. The research outcome will be presented to peers, faculty, and others at a public forum. While the topic is chosen by the self-managing team, here are some to give the reader an idea of potential scope and content:

- A new way of doing something. A process revised.
- Recruitment of new librarians.
- Achieving a post-departmental work place culture.
- Leading the new library.

Where? Based at one or more participating library schools, the institute uses existing space and resources—classroom, meeting rooms, media equipment, library staff, and resources.

When? The peer coaching project spans the semester, starting with an organizational meeting of interested students, a faculty sponsor, and the practitioner coach. The latter will work with the team of students regularly throughout the semester until the conclusion of the project—the public presentation.

How? With guidance from the sponsoring faculty member and the practitioner coach, the student team will first go through a multi-day workshop on group dynamics, communication, team building, leadership, and conflict resolution. An experiential component might include outdoor team building activities. Following this introduction, the students will establish the research topic and what will need to be done to bring it to completion.

Budget items. Compensation for the faculty sponsor, the practitioner coach, and the project manager.

- Travel and accommodation for the coach and the manager.
- Team budget, including facilitator costs for introductory workshops, meals, and lodging.
- A travel and food allocation for use by the team, as necessary, throughout the semester.