LIBRARY LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT

Engaging Leadership

Bringing Back "Innovation"

Pixey Anne Mosley

Attending conferences and workshops is a great professional activity. Benefits include broadening one's viewpoint by attending programs with provocative or radical-seeming ideas that challenge us to think and question how we view what we do in libraries. It provides the opportunity to participate in discussion groups with peers where one can engage in focused dialogues on issues of common concern. LLAMA offers a large number of these opportunities that range from specific topics, such as the Remote Storage Discussion Group, to broader interest such as the Middle Managers Discussion Group. Finally, one has a chance to casually catch up with "what's new" and brainstorm solutions for frustrating situations with colleagues from other institutions.

This provides a change of pace and a chance to gain perspective, and often has a revitalizing effort on one's leadership skills. But it also presents a risk to leaders upon their re-entry back to their home institution. The risk comes in being swept up by the passion, excitement, and enthusiasm of a new and shiny idea without really stopping to assess the appropriateness to one's local situation. Along the same lines, some speakers will present a radical or provocative idea and the listener will not necessary hear it as a call for dialogue but rather adopts it as a magic solution or cure for all ills. This is a particular risk when the speaker is highly charismatic or persuasive and the session almost begins to emulate an old-fashioned religious revival. Whether prompted by a desire for change, seeking a solution to a known problem, a concern that one's library will fall behind, or simply trying to keep up with one's peer or aspirational institutions, there is a tendency for leaders to see the idea as a holy grail and arrive back home with the burning passion to immediately implement something at their library.

At this point, you may be thinking "but why is this a bad thing?" It only seems reasonable that we would want to stay up with innovations in processes and where other libraries are going and embrace what others have already identified as "great" ideas. And you would be right, to a point. The key is recognizing the difference between a true shift that represents an emerging trend or a strategic new direction and positioning one's library in alignment with it, as opposed to a fad or one-off improvement that sounds like a really impressive idea but yields little or no actual long term impact or applied transferability to other institutions.

If one comes back from every conference or educational opportunity with the best new "innovation" since sliced bread and an insistence that it has be to done NOW, one seriously risks losing credibility and equity as a leader. There are several reasons why this hurts leaders. The first reason relates to change fatigue among staff. This occurs when staff are faced by so many changes that their resilience begins to be unable to work through the cycle of emotions that are necessary in engaging and adopting a change. In time, one will begin to face stronger and stronger resistance to moving a change forward. This can have a significant organizational impact when the change is truly an important one, but staff are so disenfranchised that the change initiative is doomed before it can begin. The second concern is that when one is constantly bringing back a new direction or initiative, there is a stronger likelihood that one has not carried a prior change through the full process of mature implementation, including assessment and evaluation of the change to determine if it accomplished what was originally intended and to make appropriate follow-up adjustments. Like the boy who cried wolf, it will lead to staff only half engaging and thereby almost assure that change initiatives will begin failing in their stated goals or objectives. It can get to the point that staff will drag their feet in implementing any change because of certainty that it will be replaced by something else within a few months. Finally, if one stops to think about it, when one is always coming back and implementing what one learned about at conference, one is really only copying and never actually doing anything that could truly be termed "innovative."

A few years back, one could not go to a major conference or participate in a webinar series without hearing Rick Anderson speak about how he quit doing serial check-in at his library and began sending journal issues direct from mailroom to shelf and why this was a great thing in creating significant resource savings and allowing for resource reallocation. I know from having been in the room during a few of those presentations and talking with colleagues at the next conference, that many library directors and technical service managers left his presentation with a fervent light of religious conversion in their eye and an intention to direct this change to happen as soon as they got home as something to make their library more efficient. But the presentation should have included the same disclaimer that one sees on weight loss commercials about "your results may vary." In truth, many libraries had already gone to a predictive automated, check-in model and the number of staff resources dedicated to serial check-in at the time was much less than the return-on-investment (ROI) experienced by the speaker. Similarly, his model was based on a serial collection that did not have to be routed to different libraries and was entirely organized by title, both unbound issues and bound volumes, so one never had to look up the title in order to put on a call number label or check the routing location to get it to the correct branch library. For classified serial collections, even if one did not "check-in" the serial, one still had to look it up in some manner to get the call number. For those who went to title based current periodical collections but retained classified bound volumes placed in the general stacks, one was simply moving the “title look-up” step from one part of the process to another. Rather than seeing his initiative as an example to encourage critical inquiry and dialogue on introducing efficiencies in current processes and reallocation of resources, leaders listened to him as if he was an apostle of the new gospel of libraries. Unfortunately, when they arrived back at their home institution with this as a directive, they damaged their reputations by having made assumptions without checking what current practices were or investigating the detailed context, thereby putting staff into the awkward and sometimes difficult position of trying to explain why it “will not work here.”

Despite being only 5’ tall and seeing myself as approachable, I’ve been told I can get a bit single-minded and be overwhelming when I become enthusiastic about an idea. I still recall a conversation some years ago with a particularly courageous front line staff member that became something of an epiphany and served as the spark for me to reexamine how I looked at leading change. I was mentioning my upcoming conference plans and the staff member spoke up and told me that the she and her colleagues hate it when I come back from conference because I bring back a whole lot of changes to implement that will not work here. In some cases I was even sending blog-like comments back via email about moving forward on an idea while still at the conference. She reminded me of a disastrous experiment the previous year when I had returned from attending the ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute and brought back a new model for managing our group study rooms based on how they did it at University of Wisconsin-Madison. This took me aback and led me to reflect on my leadership behavior. Not to say that I quit bringing back ideas, but rather I began using an approach that allowed me to reflect on them in a more thoughtful way and bring them forward in a model that fostered more participative engagement. During conferences or workshops, I would keep a small notebook to jot down ideas that caught my attention, in more recent years this list became a file on my laptop. But I did not send “go do” directions from conference or drag them out the first day I returned to the office. Instead I set myself an appointment for a couple of weeks after my return to review them. At that point, I would pull out the ideas and take a second look at them and apply some assessment criteria to place the idea in a more inquiring framework, which is discussed in more detail later. What I found was that many ideas did not hold up well once I took local perspective into consideration and was away from the charismatic enthusiasm of the person who had put it forward.

In order to get a second opinion, I brought those ideas that I felt did have potential value for enhancing the local environment to a few other improvement oriented staff members. Admittedly, I did not choose my most change-resistant employees for this feedback, nor those employees who tended to automatically agree with any suggestion made by someone hierarchically above them. Rather, I chose librarians or support staff who were open-minded to change, but also had confidence in their own knowledge and were comfortable with contributing to the decision-making process. Usually, these individuals would help flesh out ideas and provide insights into the best way to engage with the rest of the unit staff. Sometimes they added insights that helped me understand why an idea was not a good fit or that this was not the right time to roll it out. Following this approach resulted in implementing ideas that had long-term, operational enhancements and improvements.

So how does, one identify the appropriate ideas to take forward to units, teams, or even upward to administrators? There are several things to ask that can help one to think critically about an idea, and in many ways they emulate the same critical thinking skills that library users are taught about the information they find on the internet. This assessment process is not meant to squelch enthusiasm for changes and innovative ideas or drag one down in the bureaucracy, but like prospecting is rather meant to filter out the valuable gems and not waste the resilience of one's staff for adopting change. It will also help one avoid the appearance of a flighty, fad-following leader, who does not have a clear and firm sense of vision and where to take the library. There is some overlap in the questions presented below, but without it there is the risk that one will jump to a convenient answer and skip past an important assessment point. In fact, knowing the answers to several of these questions will help one evaluate the success of the change initiative.

- What problem is the idea addressing and does it have a local parallel?
- What will implementing the idea accomplish?
- Why is it a good thing to do (and because a peer library is doing it, is NOT the right answer)?
- Is in consistent with the current vision, mission, philosophy, strategic plan, and goals of the library?
- How much data is available on its success at other institution(s)?
- Did the presentation of the idea include followup assessment demonstrating successful impact and what did not work well in addition to the success story? Is there a contact to get more detailed information about it?
- What underlying assumptions is it based on? This would include an environmental scan of the structure of the institution, collection, and user community where it was implemented.
- Is it appropriate to one's library based on match points in structure, population, pedagogy, organizational culture, services, and/or resources?
- Is there a way to do a prototype or small scale implementation to test the idea locally?
- If the idea is successful, what are the scalability and sustainability issues in terms of committing resources?

- Is it a transitory idea, intended for short term improvements or to help move the organization forward, but is not in itself a long-term destination? This is an important part of communicating the change initiative and assessing the resource commitments.
- Is there a way to use the idea as the seed to something that can be grown into a better idea than what the original presenter/implementer suggested? This last question is where a good advisory team can make a difference and where one makes the transition from keeping up with trends to being a trendsetter.

Asking these questions before sending the idea forward will also help one respond more effectively when presenting the idea to one's staff because these are the questions that they will ask in processing the change into their model of acceptance and engagement. In the same way that an emotional connection will play a key role in initiating a relationship, but sustaining a long term friendship, marriage, or partnership takes thoughtful consideration and engaged communication; such is the same with leading change. Passion can create interest in an idea, but critical assessment and engaged dialogue will make a change truly impactful.

In closing, I want to return to the staff member I referenced who spoke up some years ago about my enthusiasm in immediately bringing back changes from conference. Since that time I have moved into other roles and she has taken on more leadership responsibilities in her unit that have led her to periodically attend ALA Annual Conference. We happened to be on the same flight out of Anaheim last summer and were chatting while waiting to board. She shared with me that she had seen so many great ideas and now better understands how one can fall into the trap of coming back and wanting to immediately try implementing them…but that she remembers being on the receiving end of this and seeing the effect it has in other departments and tries to think it out first. We had a good laugh together about this.

[Note: This specific story and conversation is shared with the staff member's permission and endorsement in the hope that it will encourage thoughtful leadership.]

Pixey Anne Mosley (pmosley@tamu.edu) is Professor and Interim Associate Dean for Administrative and Faculty Services at Texas A&M University.

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