

Leading change in libraries: a case study

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Background

In September 2012, the J. Willard Marriott Library at the University of Utah was at a pivotal point in its evolution. The Associate Dean (AD) for Library IT left for a new position as dean of a library at another institution. As a result, we, the Library Administration, had an opportunity to review our current IT personnel, services, and equipment, which led to the recognition of current inefficiencies in our organizational structure. For example, over the years we placed IT personnel in two different organizational departments. One department was labeled “Library IT,” which focused on enterprise services such as the library catalog, website, and digital library. The other department was titled “Computing and Media Services” (CMS), which focused on internal desktop support for library employees and desktop support for four different student computing labs throughout the campus. “Library IT” personnel reported to the AD for Library IT, which was now vacant, and “CMS” personnel reported to the AD for Research and Learning Services.

As can be expected, duplicate processes and services emerged. For example, each department had separate processes and servers for backing up valuable library data. Both departments began to develop a different version of a mobile view of the Library website without knowing it. While an associate dean with IT experience supervised the Library IT department the CMS department was supervised by an associate dean with little understanding of IT systems and potential alternatives. This lack of IT knowledge meant there was limited high level, critical review of decisions made regarding the implementation of desktop support services.

As we discussed the future, it was agreed that a focus on digitizing, archiving, and providing access to unique and rare collections would be a significant objective for the library; and that this would be the main way to demonstrate the Library’s significance, contributions, and impact

on the research and teaching activities of the University and beyond. It was clear that redirecting the efforts of our IT personnel would be needed to accomplish this goal as no new staffing would be forthcoming. This moved us to begin the process of organizational change that would bring the two IT departments – Library IT and CMS – together.

Implementation

After reviewing articles on organizational change (Burke, Lake, and Paine 2008; Geyer 2002; Kinlaw 1989; Hawks 2013; Helphand 1997; Lubans 2009; Williamson 2008) and consulting with a number of campus experts in this area, one article seemed most useful for the Library's needs: John P. Kotter, "Leading organizational change: Why transformational efforts fail" (2007). We attempted to follow the paradigm for organizational change outlined in Kotter's article. In it, he discusses eight stages of change, the first three of which are: establish a sense of urgency; form a powerful guiding coalition; and create a vision (2007, 1). According to Kotter, getting these first three stages implemented properly will lead to the successful implementation of the rest of the stages and a successful change process overall (2007, 1).

Stage 1: Establish a Sense of Urgency

To begin working on this first stage, we invited all library employees to participate in two open feedback sessions to talk about what was working well in the current IT organizational structure and what was not. Next, we held small group sessions with employees in the Library IT department. We also arranged small group sessions with employees in the CMS department and then with employees within Research and Learning Services and Special Collections. We compiled a list of all comments into a SWOT analysis – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT Analysis, 2014).

The SWOT analysis was the basis of Kotter's first stage, to establish a sense of urgency. In order to provide this sense of urgency, we focused on the following weaknesses and threats: difficulty working across organizational lines, lack of transparency regarding current IT projects, lack of prioritization of IT projects leading to some projects making progress as the result of the passion of one programmer, and a duplication of efforts between the two IT units. We also focused on one of our main strengths as a leader in the state of Utah in digital collections and identified opportunities to increase digitization efforts of our own rare materials along with improving digital preservation efforts.

This combination of weaknesses and threats that could hold us back from using our strengths to achieve new opportunities established the sense of urgency needed to make the changes to combine the Library IT and CMS departments. Using the voices of library staff as the basis of this analysis was especially helpful in meeting this initial stage of organizational change, establish a sense of urgency (Kotter 2007, 1).

[Stage 2: Form a Powerful Guiding Coalition](#)

The second stage of change as described by Kotter was to form a powerful guiding coalition. It was during this stage that we made our greatest strides toward change and our most significant missteps.

At this point, we invited a known change leader on campus to help map out the necessary steps to implement the merger of the Library IT and CMS departments. We decided that the powerful guiding coalition would consist of the AD for Research and Learning Services, the Interim AD for Library IT, and the campus change leader. To get started, the change leader recommended that we request a report from each of the Library IT and CMS departments describing their current work. The purpose of these reports was to obtain a baseline understanding of the current work completed by these departments, their vision for the future, and possible changes they could support, including a merger of the two departments.

In addition to the many thoughtful and insightful comments these reports contained, one of the departments made a consensus statement that read, “The general feeling is that Senior Administration is not listening to the concerns of those on the front lines.” Considering the number of group meetings that took place and the careful collection of feedback from those meetings, this statement seemed incongruent. Therefore, we invited another expert in change management, this time a library employee, to meet with this department without anyone from Library Administration present to obtain clarification regarding this inconsistency.

This meeting resulted in a better understanding between the department and the AD to whom they reported. Additionally, someone in the group observed that not enough people from the IT departments were included in the change process. This was an accurate statement considering the composition of the original guiding coalition and a change in the merger process was made: A task force of IT managers was created to play a pivotal role in assisting us with the merger. This task force consisted of an equal number of managers from both the Library IT and CMS departments. We called this new group “IT Managers” and they became the powerful guiding

coalition, thus accomplishing Kotter's second stage in a way that was more inclusive of the people directly involved in the change.

Stage 3: Create a Vision

During the first meeting of the IT Managers a self-assessment tool used in a previous library reorganization was presented and the group was asked to adjust this tool to reflect IT tasks and skills. When eventually distributed the self assessment tool would ask IT personnel to indicate their strengths, weakness, and list the top five areas in which they would like to work. During this first meeting of the IT Managers, an amazing change took place. They began a discussion of norms and values of a newly merged IT department, which was the beginning of a shared vision, Kotter's third stage.

Observations

The process used to merge the two departments resulted in four observations.

First Observation

As stated above, many people have written about implementing change. For this organizational change, we followed Kotter's model with some modifications. Chief among these was dealing with persistent resistance to change, which Kotter does not address in his article. It was sometimes necessary to have very frank and candid conversations with individuals who were persistent in their resistance to moving forward.

One example of this was our response to a person who continued to bring up concerns about the ability of his staff to address the workload assigned. Throughout the process of the reorganization, we took into account this person's perspective and we made significant changes to the process and the draft organizational chart to address his specific concerns. For example, the first draft organizational chart moved four people from his unit into other IT units. When he voiced concerns about this being too many people leaving his unit considering the workload, we returned two people to their original unit. Additionally, we created agreements throughout the new IT Services department for this person to request assistance from others during the busiest times for his unit.

After the third conversation of concerns expressed and compromises reached, this person continued to resist the change. At this point, we acknowledged the concerns, reflected on the compromises made, recognized that there were still areas of disagreement, and then brought

the conversation to a close by indicating that the changes would move forward with an invitation for assessment after six months. Though Kotter's model was very helpful, he does not describe how to deal with those who remain resistant to the proposed change. Obtaining skills to have difficult conversations is a necessary component to finalizing a change, especially when there are individuals who remain resistant (Soehner 2013).

Second Observation

A second observation was that some managers were not ready to act as leaders during this process. Kotter states, "A paralyzed senior management often comes from having too many managers and not enough leaders. Management's mandate is to minimize risk and to keep the current system operating. Change, by definition, requires creating a new system, which in turn always demands leadership" (2007, 1). The IT Managers brought together managers from both departments and we asked them to take on a leadership role. All members of IT Managers attended a two-hour leadership seminar to introduce them to this new role of leadership. The seminar emphasized how to communicate to others about the change in a positive manner, even if the managers themselves disagreed with the new direction.

Later in the process, it was clear that we should have provided more of this kind of training and that a 2-hour seminar was not enough to turn some individuals who were dedicated managers into true leaders. For example, a couple of managers insisted that members of their staff would quit if we continued with the merger of the two departments. We responded by suggesting that quitting a job was a personal decision and, while we would miss anyone who left, the merger would continue. Others benefitted a great deal from the seminar and their leadership skills were obvious throughout the rest of the process.

Third Observation

The third, and most surprising, observation was that some IT employees did not believe Library Administration listened to them during the change process leading to the merger. As stated previously, considering the number of group meetings that took place and the careful collection of feedback from those meetings, this statement seemed incongruent with reality. The disconnect between their belief of not being heard and the fact that we made efforts to listen to them led us to speculate that the IT employees were confusing "being listened to" with "being agreed with." In other words, did some IT employees believe that if Library Administration did not *agree* with them, Library Administration was not *listening* to them? From our point of view,

we *had heard* their concerns, but simply disagreed that the concerns were enough to stop the merger. Even though Kotter does not present this situation precisely, it seems the best solution is to continue to keep lines of communication open and a neutral party can help facilitate this open communication.

Fourth Observation

Finally, more communication might have made the process less contentious. For example, once we established a sense of urgency, each member of Library Administration should have made a point of stating this sense of urgency in all meetings we attended when library staff was present. This would have increased the number of times all library staff, including IT employees, heard the message of urgency for change and provided additional opportunities to discuss it. As Kotter states, “Without credible communication, *and a lot of it*, the hearts and minds of the troops are never captured” (2007, 6, italics added).

Conclusion

In creating organizational change, it is important to be flexible. Following the stages of organizational change that Kotter outlines and applying these stages to academic libraries was very useful. While we adjusted the stages based on cultural norms of academia in general, the stages were a helpful way to organize the process and move forward. We also adjusted Kotter’s model as the result of strong reactions from groups or individuals. Trust between employees and Library Administration was improved when we remained open to employees’ concerns and adjusted the process based on those concerns. Additionally, communicating to employees the need for change, the process to be used, and the vision for the new department was crucial in resolving concerns and encouraging employees to come into agreement with the new direction. Finally, frank and direct communication may be necessary to bring along employees remaining resistant to the very end. These conversations may be difficult but are essential to the change process and are an essential competency for leadership.

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