Managing Change with Environmental Scanning

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Rachel, the director at a midsized regional university library, looked at the two librarians standing in her doorway. She knew why they were there. Today's student newspaper announced that the university was going to close the programs in German, Italian, and Portuguese. The two women at the door specialized in reference and collecting in those areas and Rachel knew they were worried about their jobs. She also wondered if they would blame her if their jobs were negatively affected. Why hadn't she known about this? Why didn't anybody tell her? The signs of change must have been there, why hadn't she seen them?

Environmental scanning

Rachel might have had a hint that change was on the horizon if she had regularly scanned her environment to learn what was happening outside of the library and even outside of the university. Environmental scanning is the process of looking around the organization's environment to obtain information that can be used for planning and decision-making. Why scan? "Organizations scan the environment in order to understand the external forces of change so that they may develop effective responses which secure or improve their position in the future. They scan in order to avoid surprises, identify threats and opportunities, gain competitive advantage, and improve long-term and short-term planning."[1] And according to Albright, "Environmental scanning is the internal communication of external information about issues that may potentially influence an organization's decision-making process. Environmental scanning focuses on the identification of emerging issues, situations, and potential pitfalls that may affect an organization's future."[2]

Environmental scanning is not only a tool for business. Every organization, whether it is a for profit or a nonprofit, needs to be aware of its environment if it wants to be competitive – and you must be competitive if you are going to survive. A competitive nonprofit is more likely to attract capable and dedicated employees, sustain itself over time, and fulfill its mission. Increasingly, grant-making entities are taking into consideration how the organization is managed as it determines which organizations to fund. Government-related entities must also compete, for

good employees, bigger shares of tighter budgets, and in some cases, for the good will of the public, so that the public will want to support it via taxes or fees.

To become competitive, you have to know what is going on. For example, if Rachel had been keeping tabs on changes in university programs, she might have seen a trend as schools cut[3] or curtailed their programs in the humanities[4] and languages[5] programs, or how the recession and teacher layoffs resulted in the decline of a teacher training program at a SUNY campus.[6] She might have put herself in the place of shocked staff and faculty who received an email announcing the sudden closure of their school and taken it as a hint that she needed to learn more about the financial status of her own employer.[7]

Although it may seem contrary, considering that environmental scanning involves looking for information, it can actually reduce information overload for library managers. We can all relate to having more information than we know what to do with. We don't have to look for it; it comes right at us via email, television, radio, and newspapers. And then we make things worse for ourselves by using social media such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and thousands of blogs from politics to the one your sister writes about being vegan in Alaska. It can be too much, and when people are exposed to 'too much' information, they find ways to deal with it to reduce their stress. For example, they may simply fail to process, or process it incorrectly, file it away for later retrieval, process only part of it, lower standards for what constitutes acceptable information, only access parts of the information, or escape the deluge of information by ignoring it.[8] Some time ago, researchers examining consumer behavior determined that consumers simply turned off to receiving any new information, only taking in what they could handle.[9] If you take this course of action, the questions become, what do you tune out? Will that decision come back to haunt you later? For some people, just thinking about wading through the vast amounts of information that comes their way is so intimidating that they simply ignore anything other than what is necessary for their immediate needs.

So how do you narrow down the territory you need to cover without missing something? I suggest that one way to both expand your worldview and narrow it at the same time is to seek out information about your *field.* A field consists of all the other organizations that can affect your organization.[10] Your field might include book vendors, relevant regulatory agencies, licensing or educating bodies, suppliers, patrons, consortia, and the state legislature or Board of Trustees. For example, the field for Rachel's library might include YBP Library Service, the US

and state departments of education, the ALA as an accrediting body for librarian education programs, suppliers of book carts and OPAC software, the student-age population, the regional consortia of academic libraries, and the state legislature. The field includes not only the organizations with which you interact directly, such as consortia, but all those organizations whose actions can negatively or positively affect your organization and your work. Knowing your field helps to narrow your focus. You save time by only looking for changes in your field, not the whole universe.

Challenges to environmental scanning

While environmental scanning is beneficial, there are challenges that you or our organization might present that can negatively impact your efforts. Below I suggest some challenges that can easily be resolved, once you are aware of them.

Strong and weak ties. Information gathering can become problematic as the result of something we usually think of as a positive – networks. Having a close network of people we can depend upon for information is good, up to a point. The problem is, the people we are close to, our *strong ties*, tend to know the same things that we do. It is our *weak ties* that often have access to new information.[11] For example, if most of your friends at work are other librarians (your strong ties), you won't get the same information that you might from people in administration or student affairs, your weak ties. It is likely that these people move in networks other than yours and know things you don't. "Well, great," I can hear you saying to yourself, "now I have to find new friends and split up even more of my limited time." Maybe not. You can attend organization-wide meetings (instead of avoiding them), join committees, and invite people from other departments to work with you on teams and committees as appropriate. You get the benefit of getting to know people with differing viewpoints and knowledge while engaging in the work that you were going to do anyway.

Discounting the future. Some managers are so overwhelmed by the current demands of work, that they rarely give thought to what will happen tomorrow. And when they do think about it, they put less value on it than on what is happening in the present. Linstone argues that "Americans seem to have a particular penchant for discounting. They are raised on installment buying and 'fly-now-pay-later' exhortations. The writer is only as good as his latest book and the politician is attuned to the voter's query, 'But what have you done for me lately'?"[12] Think of it this way - a student needs to pay for her MFA program in poetry and takes out a student loan for $90,000.

She needs the money now for school and living expenses, preferring to let the future take care of itself (the future that is full of jobs for poets at $90,000 a year). We all do this to some degree or another, depending upon the event/problem. We buy the expensive house, barely able to make the mortgage, because we think we will have more money in the future, making it easier to pay the monthly note. We conveniently forget to figure in, we discount, all of the things – illness, recession, job loss, a change in the banking regulations that will make it harder to refinance the loan, etc. that might happen to us in the future and make that mortgage the worst thing you ever got yourself into. We read something about the trend toward cutting foreign language programs in American universities and decide not to worry about it, that 'trend' means something on its way to happening at some unknown time in the future. It certainly isn't happening now, not to us. Or so we think.

Preferring internal information. Sometimes we limit our information by our preferences for particular sources. If information doesn't come from our people, our department, or our organization, then either we don't seek it out at all, or we believe it is not as valuable as the information that we produce. It is understandable to prefer trusted sources that have been useful in the past, but they can't be used exclusively, especially when new problems require new sources.

Looking for the right answer. Librarians are trained to know the 'right' sources so they can help people find the 'right' answers. When you scan, you want to think broadly about possible problems, rather than search for definitive answers to a specific question. For example, the number of returning veterans taking advantage of their educational benefits may not directly affect your organization, but could indicate future changes in the number of nontraditional students at your school, or adult learners in the public library.[13]

Getting down to business

How can you learn more about your environment while avoiding the barriers discussed above? The following are some low tech/low effort ways to improve your environmental knowledge.

- Know your field. What people or what entities can affect your organization and in what ways?
- Do a SWOT analysis, one of the easier analytical tools and one that will force you to look beyond your immediate environment. SWOT = strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Taking Rachel's situation as our example, she might see a strength as

continued state funding at current levels (which is better than getting a budget cut); a weakness as low salaries for librarians, making it difficult to attract new employees; access to more electronic resources through the consortia as an opportunity, and population trends indicating a decline in the number of people at the traditional college age as a threat to maintaining current enrollment levels. Had Rachel made a good search for threats to the library, she might have seen language programs being cut by universities across the country. She might have decided to act rather than react by going to the departments involved to learn about their enrollments and what they thought about the future of foreign languages at their school. Through her weak ties in the administration, she might have learned that the university was considering cutting certain programs – information the departments might not have yet.

- Step away from the office. It is one thing to have subordinates tell you what's going on, it is another to walk around, talk to staff, and see for yourself what is happening in your organization. 'Management by walking around' also encourages staff to see you as approachable; they may be more likely to come to you before small problems become big ones. You should also walk around other parts of whatever constitutes your 'organization.' In a university setting, go into some buildings you've never visited before, see what kind of amenities the students have – think realistically about how your school matches up with others of a similar size and mission. Outdated classrooms and deferred maintenance should indicate that an examination of the school's financial standing is in order. If you work in a public library, get out in the community. Is there an immigrant group increasing in number? Is the area improving or is it on the decline?   Special librarians might want to learn more about the industry or agency that they serve.

- *Systems thinking.* Sometimes it takes a change in mindset to understand the benefit of environmental scanning. Instead of seeing 'silos' - independent departments, programs, institutions, agencies, or other entities - take a systems view of the world around you.[14] Systems thinking suggests that we approach problems with the understanding that parts are inter-related and inter-dependent; that a change in one part affects the whole.[15] When you see the world as an interconnected system, you understand how paying attention to trends and events outside of the library can help you see changes that may be headed your way.

- *Don't go it alone.* I understand managers are busy and don't want to add another item to their workload, however, you probably work with other librarians, maybe some library school or college student workers, and savvy paraprofessionals. Assign staff to scan in

particular areas or media.[15] If you have workers who enjoy using social media, turn them loose on the media they use anyway. Apportion scanning tasks to other workers as appropriate and as their interests and your requirements may dictate.

Conclusion

Rachel might not have been surprised by her university's actions had she been more aware of trends in university language programs, if she knew more people in the language department or if she had volunteered to be on the committee addressing possible program changes. With early information provided by environmental scanning, she might have thought of innovative and meaningful ways to reassign her librarians, rather than have to justify their existence. She might have shown the administration that she was prepared for change, rather than sitting in her office, worrying about the next email or phone call from the Provost's office.

Environmental scanning will improve your planning and decision-making. It will help you be proactive so that you can guide your organization through difficult times instead of reacting to them. Regular environmental scanning will help you to be better prepared for the changes that are sure to come.

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