

Library Leadership and Esprit de Corps

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“Our Corps, Your Corps, My Corps, Marine Corps” – Marching Cadence, USMC¹

We often associate the term ‘esprit de corps’ with military organizations, and rightly so. The strong bond that is forged between soldiers and their units is truly inspiring. Legendary Marine Corps Major General John A. Lejeune described esprit as dealing with “the spirit, the souls of people.” He noted that esprit “cannot be perceived by the five senses . . . but nevertheless, every leader knows it is the most potent of forces necessary to achieve victory.”²

So consider for a moment, your library’s overall ‘esprit de corps’ - its ‘spirit of the group.’ Do you immediately perceive a strong sense of comradery, enthusiasm, and devotion to the organization? Does your staff demonstrate a high level of engagement, teamwork, and overall job satisfaction? Or does your library suffer from an ‘esprit de corpse,’ with an environment of low morale, lack of shared purpose, and poor communication? If we’re honest, most libraries probably fall somewhere in the middle. As a leader, how does one gain the upper hand, and begin to build a greater sense a connection and belonging? By aligning library personnel with four critical elements of ‘organizational esprit’ – planning, place, provenance and personnel – leaders can harness the power of esprit de corps, and create environments of ongoing inclusion, commitment, and pride.

Esprit de Planning

It is well understood that library leaders are expected to direct the formulation of new strategic plans every four to six years. In doing so, leaders have an opportunity to re-evaluate organizational purpose, solicit input from staff, and establish new initiatives for the organization. While strategic planning calls for the identification of proactive and future-oriented change, it is critical the process involve the entire staff, and be guided by the library’s stated mission. Just as in a military exercise, a clear understanding of the overall mission is essential. In the United States Marine Corps, there are two well-established leadership objectives:

“The primary objective of Marine Corps leadership is mission accomplishment. This requires a goal-oriented approach. A leader must identify long-term goals for the team and the short-term steps the organization needs to take to achieve those goals. The secondary objective of Marine Corps Leadership is troop welfare — which can also be described as team welfare or individual welfare. This objective requires empathy on the part of the leader to make sure that the needs of those in the team are looked after.”³

Marine leaders know that while a clear sense of mission is critical to a successful operation, the overall welfare of their troops is equally important. Marines must be informed and engaged by their leaders if they are to work together as an effective team. In a similar fashion, library leaders must consider both stated mission and staff input during the strategic planning process. Library consultant Rachel Singer Gordon advises library leaders to keep their “institution’s mission in mind when creating a strategic plan, defining goals that support your stated institutional purpose, and outlining how best to meet those goals.”⁴ Gordon also encourages leaders to “work with staff and with other managers to consider multiple points of view and to integrate their various expertise. Again, staff need to be involved in planning for change, rather than receiving a finished plan from on high.”⁵

Strategic planning, however, is more than simply formulating and implementing a series of strategic goals and objectives. If a plan is to be effective, library leaders need to continually articulate the direction and vision the plan represents. Doing so will ensure a number of positive outcomes for library staff, patrons, and supporters alike. These benefits include more effective customer interactions, a consistent framework for budgeting and allocation decisions, higher staff morale due to clearly stated goals, and the ability to attract additional funding from outside sources.⁶ In their 2003 study of effective library directorship, researchers Herson, Powell, and Young highlight essential leadership traits in a variety of categories including “Planning” and “Leadership (Strategic Directions).”⁷ Within these groupings, a focus on articulating direction, commitment to mission, consensus building, and community involvement are key attributes. If the direction of a strategic plan is thoughtfully formulated and clearly communicated, staff will have a better understanding of where the library is headed and why. This knowledge translates into a better understanding of staff relationships and roles, increased energy, and a greater sense of shared organizational purpose.

While the majority of strategic planning focuses on the creation of new initiatives, it is equally imperative that organizations eliminate existing activities deemed no longer necessary. In his seminal 2001 study of good-to-great companies, business expert Jim Collins notes, “those who built the good to great companies made as much use of ‘stop doing’ lists as ‘to-do’ lists. They displayed a remarkable discipline to unplug all sorts of extraneous junk.”⁸ Of particular note, Collins and his research team emphasize that in any good-to-great transformation, the budgeting process can be used as an effective tool in executing an organization’s ‘stop-doing’ list. For Collins, the budget process is not about “figuring out how much each activity gets . . . but about determining which activities should be fully strengthened and which should be eliminated entirely.”⁹ For libraries, ‘stop-doing’ lists can include eliminating ineffective services, suspending outdated fundraising efforts, or repurposing physical spaces. In some cases, learning to ‘shut off’ obsolete services can be the most difficult aspect of the strategic planning process. However, with a clear mission, strong leadership, and an informed staff, libraries can address these challenges, and establish a new course of proactive and sustainable change.

Esprit de Place

Take a quick walk around your library. Does the physical environment appear tired and uninspiring? Are service points and workspaces bland and non-descript? How about the staff themselves - do they appear energetic and engaged? Does your library publicly celebrate staff performance and achievements in a tangible way, or post prominent references to organizational mission, current initiatives or recent performance data? If not, your library may be underutilizing one of its greatest assets for engaging staff and building esprit - its physical space. Management expert Stewart Liff has written extensively on the inspirational power of the workplace, a phenomenon he calls 'shaping space' or 'seeing is believing.' Liff's extensive experience has led him to understand that workspaces can be purposefully re-designed to help us "feel, see, hear, and touch the agency mission."¹⁰ By utilizing the principles of visual management, leaders can improve staff performance by translating organizational priorities into visual stimuli. Such stimuli can include vision maps, performance charts, photographic exhibits, data displays, and employee profiles.¹¹

Redesigned library spaces can offer not only improved staff communication and performance, but also provide an opportunity for community building or 'place-making.' In their 2002 article on designing transcendent library spaces, librarian Sam Demas and architect Jeffrey Scherer define 'place-making' as "the art and science of crafting spaces in ways that transcend their physical attributes."¹² In their estimation, a successful library building is one that creates a sense of connection to the values and intellectual life of the community. Working with architects, Demas and Scherer discuss how librarians can utilize a variety of design trends to enhance the functionality, collegiality, and overall enjoyment of the library. These include the creation of group study spaces, comfortable reading nooks, collaborative workspaces, smart classrooms, natural lighting features, public meeting rooms, gallery spaces, and 'what's new' displays. In more recent years, collaborative library workspaces have been enhanced through the implementation of digital media centers, maker-spaces, outdoor terraces, performance spaces, and cafes.¹³ These customer-driven spaces have grown in popularity as libraries have actively transitioned from traditional 'book warehouses' to modern 'active learning centers.'

In the Marine Corps, this 'connection to community' can be expressed through military base open-houses, air shows, parades, and holiday toy drives. Business leader and former Marine Dan Carrison describes these events as "displays of power," noting that the Marine Corps has the unique ability to 'flex its collective muscle' and inspire both military and civilian populations. In the business world, Carrison draws comparisons to major manufacturers like Boeing, and their elaborate internal celebrations. When the Boeing 777 passenger aircraft was unveiled in 1994, Boeing employees were the first to see it in an exclusive 'Working Together' company event.¹⁴ "Factory tours, ceremonial product rollouts, and internal self-aggrandizing notices all serve to make each employee, from the person who sweeps the floor to the CEO, aware and proud of his company's strengths."¹⁵ By focusing on connecting with the community, library leaders can enhance their building's esprit de place - demonstrating value, expanding cooperation, embracing change, and inspiring organizational pride.

Esprit de Provenance

Just as physical space can encourage strong feelings of ownership, connectivity, and pride, so too can organizational history. In her 2005 article on the value of library history, librarian Bernadette Lear laments that few libraries capitalize on their unique story and community legacy. Lear notes that a well-researched and organized historical record can be a tremendous resource "for everything from answering administrative questions to crafting fundraising and marketing pieces. It can also be a reservoir of professional pride and values, infusing current efforts and direction."¹⁶ Lear urges library leaders to consider their unique history as an important organizational asset. Beyond the occasional anniversary or celebration, library history should be actively collected, managed, and promoted on a routine basis. As Lear correctly notes, "in many communities, libraries have outlasted almost every business, social service organization, and entertainment hotspot that existed when the library was built."¹⁷

Library leaders can take advantage of their organizational history by documenting and promoting timelines, recognizing key benefactors, reflecting on defining moments, and highlighting historical artifacts. In his work with the Department of Veterans Affairs, management expert Stewart Liff created prominent historical displays to link particular wartime eras with appropriate VA benefits and services.¹⁸ By using large-scale military artifacts such as plane cockpits, jeeps, and cannons, Liff was able to bring the past to life, and inspire both workers and veterans with an environment of patriotism and meaning.

In a similar fashion, libraries can emphasize historical artifacts by relocating portraits or statuary of previous library leaders or major benefactors. In addition, libraries can exhibit the contents of former time capsules, create engaging visual timelines, highlight historic architecture, or feature collages of historic postcards, photographs, or blueprints. Such displays can easily crossover into 'virtual' library spaces, and be featured on library websites and social media platforms.

Marine Corps leadership also understands the motivational power of history and heritage. From day one of basic training, Marine recruits are indoctrinated into the principles and values of the Corps. Upon completion of 'boot camp' basic training, Marines are presented with the eagle, globe, and anchor emblem, and together recite the Marine Corps oath.¹⁹ These shared symbols, actions, and training serve to unite all current and former Marines. Additional traditions, such as the official Marine Corps birthday, hymn, uniform, flag, and motto 'Semper Fidelis,' solidify these connections, tying all Marines to their proud and illustrious history.

While libraries do not have official hymns or oaths, they often have meaningful symbols in the forms of flags or logos, and inspiring mottos in the forms of slogans, taglines, and vision statements. Library personnel also receive shared training through completion of professional certifications and degrees, and are guided by a common code of ethics.²⁰ By incorporating library history into visual displays, traditions, and symbols, library leaders can create dynamic workplaces that venerate former leaders, celebrate past accomplishments, recognize innovations, and connect employees to shared training and purpose.

Esprit de Personnel

While library planning, facilities, and history are all important, it is library staff that set plans in motion, and bring services to life. It is critical therefore, for library leaders to remember that employees are more than just workers, they are people too - people with varying degrees of experience, expertise, and professional aspirations. Leaders must take the time to listen to their concerns, observations, and ideas. In her excellent article on creating a culture of organizational esprit, business writer Margo Porter discusses the importance of staff involvement. Drawing on the observations of Mary Main, director of human resources at Bates College, Porter notes, "What disengages employees is when they're not being asked to participate and have a voice, when they are not being challenged in their work, and when they don't feel like their supervisor is really listening to their suggestions and thoughts. We all want to be paid well and have great benefits, but beyond those basic needs of employment, we want to feel like we're considered part of the community and have a voice."²¹

However, library leaders must do more than just listen and observe. They must display genuine concern for the professional and personal welfare of their staff. As Marine Col. Wesley Fox succinctly notes, “care and concern for subordinates mark the leader; the subordinates of such leaders become followers.”²² Such care for employees is one of the foundational characteristics for developing trust, and trust is essential for workplace relationships to succeed. In military organizations, such genuine trust and concern translate directly into the principle of loyalty, a powerful emotion to which American service members pledge their duty and honor. According to military leadership expert Julia Dye, “Loyalty is the most common expression of all the Marine Corps leadership traits and characteristics.” Dye notes that in the military, loyalty is expected to flow up and down the chain of command. “A leader expresses loyalty to his subordinates by supporting their needs and ensuring their welfare in a number of ways. Subordinates express loyalty to that sort of caring leadership by positively and efficiently carrying out the leader’s orders and instructions.”²³ By ensuring that trust and communication are consistently expressed as a two-way street, library leaders can build organizational loyalty, and enhance staff performance, dedication, and long-term retention.

Lastly, it is important to remember that rebuilding ‘esprit de corps’ is a lengthy and ongoing process. For it to be successful, staff must be consistently and thoughtfully engaged in a variety of areas. To achieve this, library leaders must continually solicit opinions and insights from those around them. As leadership consultant Mark Sanborn notes, “doing so will allow each individual’s insights to become learning points for the group.” To engage others, Sanborn suggests that leaders regularly ask the following questions: What do you think we should do? What would you do if you were in my shoes? What opportunities are we missing? What information or ideas do you have that would be beneficial?²⁴

While engaging employees at all levels of an organization is critically important, business and human resources experts Rudy Karsan and Kevin Kruze believe that engaged employees must also be aligned with an organization’s purpose and goals. Karsan and Kruze refer to this crucial pairing of engagement and alignment as ‘harmonization.’ In their minds, “Harmonization at work consists of creating an environment that fosters engagement and harnesses the collective power of the workforce toward common goals.” Such alignment doesn’t mean everyone simply marching lockstep in the same direction. Rather, it implies everyone knowing which hill to climb, and why they are climbing that particular hill. Karsan and Kruze believe such vital alignment only happens through purposeful, individual contact. “Every time you reach a team member, whether in a personal chat, email, or large meeting, you have the opportunity to build trust, to share, to listen, and to align.”²⁵

Reclaiming Esprit de Purpose

If your library is suffering from a lack of mission, alignment, or morale, try implementing some or all of the 'organizational esprit' elements outlined above. As a leader, one must involve staff in planning and decision-making processes, recognize the potential of physical and virtual library spaces, capitalize on unique historical legacies, and demonstrate genuine engagement, trust, and concern. With patience and perseverance, library personnel will come to rediscover their shared organizational mission, and reclaim their common 'esprit de purpose!'

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¹ Larry Smith, *The Few and the Proud: Marine Corps Drill Instructors in Their Own Words* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 251.

² Col. Wesley L. Fox, USMC (Ret), *Six Essential Elements of Leadership: Marine Corps Wisdom of a Medal of Honor Recipient* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 19.

³ Michael Lee Stallard, "Leadership Lessons from the U.S. Marines," *Connection Culture Blog*, accessed November 20, 2015, <http://connectionculture.com/lead-like-u-s-marine/>

⁴ Rachel Singer Gordon, *The Accidental Library Manager* (Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc., 2004), 194.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁶ Joseph R. Matthews, *Strategic Planning and Management for Library Managers* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2005), 63.

⁷ Peter Hernon and Ronald R. Powell and Arthur P. Young, *The next library leadership: attributes of academic and public library directors* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2003), 121-122.

⁸ Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 139.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁰ Stewart Liff. "Shaping Space for Success: The Power of Visual Management," *The Public Manager* 41, no.1 (Spring 2012): 30.

¹¹ Stewart Liff and Pamela A. Posey, *Seeing is Believing* (New York: AMACOM, 2004), 172-194.

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- ¹² Sam Demas and Jeffrey A. Scherer, "Esprit de Place: Maintaining and Designing Library Buildings to Provide Transcendent Spaces," *American Libraries* 33, no.4 (April 2002): 65.
- ¹³ Phil Morehart, "Designs that Last," *American Libraries* 45, no.9/10 (September/October 2014): 38-39.
- ¹⁴ Guy Norris, "Boeing 777 – 20 Years On – A Roll Out to Remember (1994)," *Aviation Week Blog*, April 9, 2014, <http://aviationweek.com/blog/boeing-777-20-years-roll-out-remember-1994>. See also, "Boeing 777 Working Together RollOut Event," YouTube, accessed November 20, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0kz9iS7iWs>
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- ¹⁶ Bernadette Lear, "The Hippest History," *Library Journal* 130, no.9 (May 15, 2005): 52.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Stewart Liff, "Shaping Space for Success: The Power of Visual Management," *The Public Manager* 41, no.1 (Spring, 2012): 32.
- ¹⁹ "Principles & Values," United States Marine Corps, accessed November 20, 2015, <http://www.marines.com/history-heritage/principles-values>
- ²⁰ "Code of Ethics of the American Library Association," American Library Association, accessed November 20, 2015, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/proethics/codeofethics/codeethics>
- ²¹ Margo Vanover Porter, "Create an Esprit-de-Corps Culture," *Business Officer* 45, no.10 (May 2012): 17-18.
- ²² Col. Wesley L. Fox, USMC (Ret), *Six Essential Elements of Leadership: Marine Corps Wisdom of a Medal of Honor Recipient* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 18.
- ²³ Julia Dye, *Backbone: History, Traditions, and Leadership Lessons of Marine Corps NCOs* (Oxford: Osprey, 2011), 175-176.
- ²⁴ Mark Sanborn, *You Don't Need a Title to be a Leader* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 60.
- ²⁵ Rudy Karsan and Kevin Kruse, *We: How to Increase Performance and Profits Through Full Engagement* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2011), 132-148.