

## LLAMA President's Message

Pixey Anne Mosley



As I am writing this column, I am watching the news about Hurricane Irma leaving a mess in Florida and National Guard helicopters are flying over my house headed to Houston. This is because I live in College Station, Texas, about 100 miles north of the center of Houston and we have become a major staging area for the Hurricane Harvey recovery efforts. Fortunately, the damage we took locally was comparatively minor. Even though we had a lot of rain, most of it came in bands that allowed the creek and river drainage systems to do their jobs. That said, I did end up dealing with some minor flooding in one library building from leaking window seals and a fried HVAC system in a branch library because of basement flooding due to a failed sump pump float sensor (that had no redundancy).

In watching the coverage and aftermath of these storms along with dealing with the local cleanup, something seemed to jump out at me as an issue of concern for any leader to consider. This is the question of why we seem determined to be optimistic visionaries to the degree that it takes a devastating catastrophe to provide the impetus to actually address foundational and infrastructure issues.

As a former aerospace engineer, much of my pre-library educational background and professional experience centered around innovation within a context that also considered margins of safety, feasibility, maintainability, survivability and even manufacturing compliance. This does not necessarily make me less of a risk taker but it does make me approach risks from a much more analytical perspective that tries to weigh the possibilities, impact, and likelihood of a failure in context of what can and should be done up front to mitigate it. Yet, I have sat at many administrative tables or in conference programming within the library world as someone is enthusiastically promoting the new grand idea with no consideration of the long term

implementation issues. This has sometimes resulted in my facing criticism and accusations of not being sufficiently innovative or visionary when expressing feasibility or long term sustainability concerns.

I have observed that it frequently seems to be part of our culture to come back from professional workshops and meetings with the great new idea to try. Similarly, incoming library administrators tend to bring their own new direction for organizational growth rather than choosing to carry forward previously initiated goals or shoring up infrastructure needs. While new perspectives are a part of the formula for moving a library organization forward, new initiatives needs to happen in a grounded and thoughtful way. If the launch of the new approach does not include a resource assessment, consider the long-term perspective, and make intentional decisions on which resources to divert to the effort, it can be a catastrophe waiting to happen. At some point, an organization's finite resources become insufficient to accomplish all of the aspirational and operational wants and needs. As a consequence, either key core services and infrastructure or the new initiative will begin to fail. Sometimes the failures come in trickles as small irritants or inconsistencies until they hit a critical mass and all of a sudden everyone realizes something is broken. Other times, the trigger is cataclysmic in nature and things go from slightly messed up to fouled up beyond comprehension at a pace that feels shockingly sudden. The risk of this is particularly problematic when there is rapid turnover of leadership or a lack of clear understanding and agreement of an organization's priorities.

For the overall future success of libraries and library organizations, it is important to balance inspiration and logistical reality. This means leaders should guard against getting so wrapped up in innovation and change that they lose sight of the need to continue supporting core functions and the overall infrastructure. So the next time you get enthused about a great new idea and want to embrace it as a solution in search of a problem and infuse it with a sense of urgency, make sure you are not constructing it on a flood plain without adequate drainage for when things go wrong or pulling resources from your dams and power grid infrastructure to accomplish it.

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