Leading Others to Lead: The Importance of Staff Empowerment in Times of Change

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Abstract

Change management can be one of the most difficult aspects of library leadership with well-known issues and challenges, such as inertia, fear, and resistance to change. However, by embracing change management as a long-term program for building trust, communication, and empowerment of staff, library leaders can create environments where change not only happens but is embraced by all levels of the library hierarchy. In this article, the authors share their work and research as part of a library staff empowered by their library dean to guide the formation and piloting of public service model changes due to the planning of a new library building. Library leaders can use these insights as they work with their staff to implement change at their libraries.

Introduction

Each library staff has its own culture and context that makes it unique in the ways staff handle change; however, library leaders can use best practices and insights to more successfully guide change no matter what group of library staff they are leading. For example, all library leaders can work to establish trust and a culture of support and risk-taking far in advance of any large change and especially before there is an organizational crisis (Brown 2018; Farrell 2018; Smith 2005b; Smith 2006a). Trust and courage are needed to embrace change and work together, especially when leaders want to empower staff to lead change efforts. Change only happens through people's work (Smith 2005a) and while changes to library service models may fall under the category of "organizational change," people make up the organization. And only people, in this case the library staff, have the ability to make the change successful or not. The literature around leadership, both in the library field and in other fields, provides theories and suggestions on how to effectively manage change, which is about effectively working with and leading people. Participatory management, shared leadership, and empowerment approaches actively involve individuals throughout an organization in the change process. Library leaders who employ some form of democratic or group-based decision-making processes ensure a higher likelihood that the decisions will be accepted, in contrast with autocratic, or hierarchical, decision-making approaches (Vroom and Yeton 1973).

In this article, the authors discuss the participative, empowerment-based approach undertaken by their library leadership in response to change. In this case, the university is constructing a new building to house the library and the library dean decided this was an excellent opportunity to assess and suggest changes to the library's public service models. The library dean's empowerment of staff to lead this change increased engagement with this continuing, multi-year process and continues to give everyone in the library the opportunity to help shape the library's future. Details of this process, along with the literature on empowering staff and managing change, can give library leaders ideas to implement before and during the next major change at their libraries.

The literature surrounding change and leadership is clear that: 1) leaders have great influence on the success or failure of change in their organizations, but they cannot sustain the

change by themselves and 2) effective communication throughout the organization is essential to success. Specifically, by sharing responsibility for the process with others in the organization, leaders may be able to reduce the friction that is an inevitable part of change. Through understanding and incorporating best practices, library leaders can support and empower their staff through times of change.

Leadership Influence in Empowering Staff

Library leaders have great influence on the change process, especially if they use their authority and influence to empower staff to create lasting change. A participatory management approach entails a leader inviting employees to participate in the decision-making process of the organization. Discussions of the effectiveness of participative management styles in libraries were common in the library literature during the 1970s and 1980s (Burckel 1984) and library leaders created committees and task forces to manage work in various library areas (Haro 1972; Marchant 1984; Taylor 1984). Research on the implementation of participatory management in libraries connected this approach to both improved library service and staff who felt that their voices were important and contributed to the management of the library (Marchant 1984).

A related leadership model is shared leadership, which harnesses the power of peers working together as opposed to a top-down leadership approach (Cox, Pearce, and Perry 2003). Cawthorne (2010) examined shared leadership in academic libraries and the importance of employing an inclusive leadership style. This allows the library to benefit from the ideas and leadership skills of employees at all levels. Some of the outcomes of such "frontline empowerment" include improved communication, coordination, accountability, and the effectiveness of changes for the organization (Cawthorne 2010, 151). Shared leadership has been found to be a useful indicator of team effectiveness when teams are working on complex tasks, and using either a transformational or empowering leadership style can further improve team effectiveness (Pearce and Sims 2002).

Empowering staff to participate in planning for the future during times of change can benefit the organization in a variety of ways, such as those previously mentioned. Mohrman, Cohen, and Mohrman (1995) defined empowerment as "the capability to make a difference in the attainment of individual, team, and organizational goals" (279). To successfully empower library staff, a library leader must provide clear organizational direction and support the capability of their staff to work towards shared goals. The core elements required for supporting the capability of empowered staff include leaders ensuring staff have the knowledge, skills, information, material resources, and authority needed to successfully fulfill their charge (Mohrman, Cohen, and Moreman 1995, 282-283). Leaders should ensure that their empowered staff have the information and tools needed to succeed, along with frequent opportunities for leader feedback as they proceed through their process (Duck 1993).

Staff Empowerment in Overcoming Change Opposition

Many common issues, such as inertia, lack of motivation, and even active opposition to change may actually stem from a deeper issue of lack of trust and overwhelming fear or shame of being made irrelevant (Brown 2018; Farrell 2018) that must be addressed to have productive changes and growth in libraries. Smith (2005b) notes that library leaders must help library employees see their personal role in the changes so they do not feel abandoned and can own the changes when they occur. Fears and concerns need to be treated with empathy in order to

have employees truly heard and not just "feel" like they have been heard (Brown 2018; Smith 2006a; von Dran 1993). Giving individuals a voice and potential influence on how change will be implemented may decrease the amount of resistance to potential changes (Van Duinkerken and Mosley 2011). As is seen in all the literature, the groundwork to prevent or mitigate issues that arise with change must be laid not days, but months and years in advance (Farrell 2018). Failure happens because leaders do not attend to the human and humane side of organizational change (Smith 2006b). Library leaders need to understand and commit to the time it takes to truly create lasting change.

Inertia is a powerful force and, if change is not seen as a process rather than a project, employees can slip back into the old ways of doing things after a pilot is completed. Turner (2018) noted that change is more complex than simply using data, and emotions—the human element—must be addressed to have sustainable, successful change. Being strategic about the timing of change implementations can overcome some of the inertia. Changes in leadership, budget, and external pressures can be used as catalysts to initiate changes in culture that sustain organizational changes (Farrell 2018). Furthermore, library leaders must provide support both during the change and after to ensure that staff do not slip back into the old way of doing things because it is familiar or due to opposition. Support after the service model change should include assessment and review to embed the change (Farrell 2018).

While resistance to change is ubiquitous (Smith 2005c) and somewhat daunting, library leaders can respond in ways that are effective and enable successful change. In addition to the groundwork and continuing communication, getting to the why behind change resistance provides another point where library leaders can learn from and work with their staff. To ignore or discount or belittle those who have reservations or concerns is not productive for anyone. Instead, library leaders must engage and have frontline managers engage with their staff to provide space to listen to concerns, try to address them, and—if there is trust and courage in the library organization—grow together stronger as a result (Brown 2018; Smith 2005c). Not every concern necessitates a change in plans, but some will. And, there will occasionally be resistance for a variety of unproductive reasons, in which case library leaders must use their authority and power to ensure that a vocal minority does not have an outsized negative effect and prevent change from happening (Farrell 2018; Smith 2005c).

Furthermore, library leaders cannot realistically expect library staff to embrace change if they are not supported as noted in the previous section on empowering staff. This support should take many forms, including praise (Düren 2016). Increased engagement and involvement with the process should be rewarded with public praise. Professional development opportunities should be offered to all staff, regardless of level in the organization (O'Sullivan and Partridge 2016). Workshops on improving communication should be attended by library leadership, supervisors, and front-line employees. Library leaders can improve their own communication styles and strategies and mentor their staff so that there is a feedback loop that will have positive ripples throughout the library's service points and collective culture. Workshops and discussions held on change management and the process of change can be another way to support both the work and the emotional health of library employees (Brown 2018; O'Sullivan and Partridge 2016).

Continuing Empowerment through Clear Communication

Communication is important in all aspects of librarianship and is especially important during times of change. The literature is unambiguous on this point: clear, ongoing, and targeted

communication, which includes listening, cannot be overstated in its importance during times of change (Smith 2006a). Communication takes time, but without it there will be no buy-in and no lasting and productive change in the library (Smith 2006b). Communication cannot be thought of as an afterthought to the "real" work of change. Without effective communication, there will be no change.

One step that is crucial for leading and communicating through change is fostering an environment that is supportive of open communication regardless of an employee's place on the official organizational hierarchy (Brown 2018). Communication and managing through change is all about people (Smith 2005a). Library employees must feel safe and encouraged to participate and empowered to engage in all stages of a change, especially a large change such as reconfiguring service points and service models (O'Sullivan and Partridge 2016; Smith 2006a). And, often, leaders need to listen more than they talk to really dig into issues and concerns, as are dealt with more deeply in the next section (Düren 2016; Smith 2006a).

But before the change gets underway, library leaders have the crucial role of communicating why there is a need for change now (Smith, 2005b; Wheeler and Holmes, 2017). Throughout these communications, leaders should emphasize how the library is ready for change and involve all employees with the change. Furthermore, library leaders must be honest with themselves and their staff as to whether the library has the capacity to change or whether there is not receptive culture to change (Turner 2018). As O'Sullivan and Partridge (2016) noted in their work, it took a year of focusing explicitly on communication and involving all library staff in an environmental scan, workshops, and professional development activities before their university library enacted a formal change process.

The literature also makes clear that library leaders have an important role in modeling positive communication styles before, during, and after a change (Farrell 2018; Wheeler and Holmes 2017). If a library leader hordes information or does not communicate respectfully and in a participatory manner, it sends a signal that open communication is not valued (O'Sullivan and Partridge 2016). This will have detrimental effects on any effort to engage and solicit support for service model changes. Leaders must practice their empathy skills and fully engage with their staff in two-way communication (Düren 2016).

Library leaders should proactively communicate or risk gossip, fears, and misinformation to fill the vacuum in the library (Brown 2018). Leaders must communicate early, often, and in many modalities in order to reach all library employees (Düren 2016). Just as with sharing the overall vision and mission of the library, library leaders must embody the excitement they want to see in their staff and share their message so often that they feel they are boring everyone with their vision (Smith 2005a). At that point, a library leader may have shared the information enough times, in enough places, in enough ways that the majority of library staff will have heard the message (Smith 2006a).

These best practices and insights from the literature are useful places to start for any library leader considering embarking on a change process and what to empower their staff to create lasting changes. The authors' library dean decided to empower the staff to take responsibility for creating the change they wanted to see in service models in a new library building. After discussing the multi-year process and products of this change plan so far, the authors share insights and recommendations for library leaders who also want to empower their staff through times of change.

Libraries at Sister Campuses: Service Model Change Processes

Prior to the design of a new service model for the new library at the Hayward campus of California State University, East Bay, the authors undertook a study of public service models at their sister campuses in a large, public state university system (Alexander and Wakimoto 2019). Through surveys and interviews with librarians in public service-oriented positions, we examined the library service models at each campus and how each library implemented changes. The direct influence of library leadership (i.e. library deans) on service model change was clear in four of the interviews we conducted.

While all four library deans took a participatory management approach to implementing changes, they differed in their involvement and the outcomes they engendered. The first library dean tasked library staff with developing a new service model without prescribing (either implicitly or explicitly) which model should be chosen. The staffing environment of this library was also influenced by the library dean who factored willingness to change and experiment with new service models as part of their hiring decisions. This helped to create an environment where library employees were willing participants in the change process. As seen in the literature, having a culture that is change-ready is an important factor in empowering library staff to develop changes within the library (Farrell 2018).

The other three libraries had less positive experiences with including library staff input into service model changes. The second library dean convened committees and task forces to examine service issues and make recommendations, which can be part of an empowering process. However, the recommendations from those groups resulted in only minor changes. The library could not come to a level of consensus or energy needed to support major service model changes. The third library dean also set up a task force to look at service issues and make recommendations, but the employees who participated in the task force felt that their recommendations were not genuinely considered and were not seen as valuable. This is a tremendous issue, as seen previously in the literature (Brown 2018; Smith 2006a), and can stymie any change. At this library, the dean was seen as being a "firm believer" and "strong proponent" of a particular service model, and in the end, it appeared to staff that the leader's vision trumped the task force's recommendations. This lack of transparency around desired goals and having only the facade of empowerment can undermine any change effort. At the fourth library, the dean created a task force to look at the library's service model with the ultimatum that they "need to change or else -- or else [the leader was] going to give [the staff] something to change into." The task force worked to gather data, study the library literature, and analyze the physical space available in the library for services. But the members of the task force interpreted comments from the leader as prescribing a specific outcome from the task force, even though it wasn't explicitly stated, because that is "what a lot of librarians 'heard' with the [leader's] attitude." This instance again shows that the library leadership must truly want to have participatory, empowering processes for change instead of using these processes as veneers for doing "business as usual" where the library leader's opinion is the only one that counts for decision making.

Service Model Change Process at Cal State East Bay University Libraries

Often the impetus for large-scale change in organizations is due to forces outside the organization's direct control, such as budget changes or changes to the physical buildings (Farrell 2018). At California State University, East Bay, the campus learned it would be receiving state funding for a new building to replace the aging library. The campus used this opportunity

to develop a new vision for how the library could serve the needs of students, faculty, staff, and the broader community. The change process used within the authors' library to plan and implement a new service model shows how library leadership that truly empowers staff to take ownership of a change process can be successful.

Planning for a New Library Building

Planning and designing a new library building is a multi-year process, which is useful for library leaders who want to take the time to facilitate a staff-led, empowering process for service model change. Design work by an architecture firm for the replacement library building at California State University, East Bay began in 2017. The architectural firm worked closely with the campus president and his executive cabinet to develop a vision for the new building and solicited broad feedback from campus constituents, including library staff, faculty, campus staff, and students. This report included a high-level service and operational model, and space programming recommendations. Once this report was delivered, design work on the physical layout of the building began in 2018. The library had representatives on this planning team, along with other stakeholders from across campus. The design of the physical spaces was aligned with the vision and high-level service model delivered in the 2017 report.

Concurrent with this campus-wide process, the library also held its own, internal feedback forums and discussions to determine priorities and needs for this new building that were conveyed to the campus planning team via the library's representatives. The library dean also determined that it would be advantageous for the library staff to begin discussing and planning their own, detailed plan for the library service model in the new building. While the core mission of the library—to support student success and campus information needs—would not change, the new building layout and proximities of various service points would necessitate a reimagining of the library's public service model.

Developing a Detailed Service Model

At the beginning of 2019, the library dean formed a committee of library staff to develop a specific service model plan for the new building, which is scheduled to open in 2021. The membership of this committee was comprised of non-management representatives from all library units, including the library tutoring center. The library dean charged the committee with creating a report on the proposed library service model and encouraged the members of the committee to think creatively to envision services that would fulfill the vision of the building and meet the needs of the campus community. The committee received assistance from a consulting company to support its work developing a service model design plan for the new library building.

The committee invited participation of all library staff at three different points during the six-month service model design planning process. At an all-staff retreat, the committee led library staff through visioning and service philosophy brainstorming activities. Based on staff feedback from the retreat and the skills learned in the service model design workshops, the committee drafted a service model. At a second all staff meeting, the committee introduced the draft service model and user experience map developed by the committee. As the committee worked on finalizing its service model design report to the library dean, it hosted drop-in sessions to solicit feedback from all staff on specific service proposals being considered by the committee. The committee used the feedback from staff to revise the final list of service recommendations in its service model design report to the library dean. After reviewing this

report, the library dean shared it with the entire library staff so everyone could see the recommendations and how their input shaped the report demonstrating a commitment to continued communication throughout the library (Wheeler and Holmes 2017).

Piloting the Service Model

The committee's report recommended two phases of pilot service programs over two years. A second committee was formed to recommend implement and assessment plans for the first phase of pilot programs (2019-2020), as well as to recommend pilot service programs for the second phase in year two (2020-2021). This committee is similar in representation as the first, with all organizational groups represented and made up of members in non-management roles. Piloting the service ideas will allow for additional data gathering and input opportunities, in order for the organization to assess which elements are successful before the new building is opened. The pilot process serves as a low-stakes way to determine if concerns about various elements of the service model materialize. It is hoped that the success of pilot projects may reduce staff resistance to the larger proposed service model changes.

As the change process moves forward and pilot programs are put into place, input will be sought continuously from library staff as well as other stakeholder groups on campus. The assessment of the effectiveness of the pilot projects is a critical element and necessitates feedback from users, library staff, and other stakeholders on campus. The outcomes of these pilots will serve to both influence the second pilot phase and the ultimate implementation of the changed service model in the new building.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The decision to empower staff to lead the library through the service model design phase of the change process, rather than using a top-down leadership approach, provided an opportunity for staff throughout the library to have input and ownership of the change process. The recommendation to phase in service changes during a two-year pilot process will allow the library to make small steps towards affecting broader service model changes. There are three lessons from the authors' experiences that library leaders can use when planning and implementing a process for change at their libraries: 1) empowering non-management staff in change process, 2) communicating openly and providing opportunities to participate in the process, and 3) gathering and responding to input about processes and changes.

Empowering Non-Management Staff in the Change Process

Our library dean took a chance to empower the staff to lead in the change process. The selection of non-management level employees to lead the work of designing the new service model was a new approach for our library. The committee members had a clear charge to create a service model that aligned with the vision and concept of the new building provided by the architects' report. The appointment of non-managers to complete this work was an opportunity for the committee members to "lead from the middle," or in this case with a relatively flat organization, lead from the bottom. The members of both committees comprise what is often described as "frontline" staff; they work extensively with the library's user population from service points such as the reference desk, the circulation desk, the technical support desk, and the student tutoring center. This work and knowledge should be leveraged in a change process.

While implementing a participatory management approach is not new in libraries, creating a committee that excludes management-level staff is less common. One often cited benefit of including frontline staff in a participative management model is that those staff members often have more knowledge and experience with direct user needs that those higher in the organization (Marchant 1982). The participatory management approach provides opportunities for individuals not in hierarchical leadership positions to have their voices heard and contributions recognized as part of the change process. Haro (1972), in his work on change in academic libraries, specifically recommended that staff in management positions not be full members of what he called "research groups" working to research and implement service changes, because it would be possible for them to "intimidate or easily monopolize" the work of the committee (99). By creating a committee of non-management level staff, the library dean encouraged out-of-the-box thinking not constrained by leadership or management perspectives. The library dean was also sincere in promising to not interfere with the committee's work and to not express any opinions that could have swayed the outcomes and recommendations made by the committee.

Open Communication and Opportunities to Participate

Extending invitations to contribute input or participate in the change process as it proceeds allows all employees to feel heard and valued, as well as have a stake in the outcome of the process (O'Sullivan and Partridge 2016; Smith 2006a). A way to ensure that a change process fails is to appoint a committee to decide an organization's future and not communicate anything about the process and reject any staff input (Duck 1993). Concealing the process of change inside a "black box" with no communication in or out breeds rumors and conspiracy theories that may be way more damaging to employee productivity and morale than the changes that are being planned in secrecy.

Clear, transparent communication and listening to employees, along with having them contribute to the change process, increases their investment and reduces their resistance to the change process. For example, the authors' library dean solicited questions about the building design process and service model proposals from staff and answered them at an all-staff retreat. These concerns and questions were not dismissed, but considered and responded to. Likewise, the committee formed by the library dean solicited extensive feedback from library staff on their vision and ideas for changes to the library service model and potential pilots. This input was incorporated into the report and is the basis for the first round of pilots. While not all library staff members chose to participate and share their opinions, there were multiple opportunities for everyone to participate and the library dean supported this participation.

Continuous Gathering of Input

The gathering of input and need for clear communication does not stop when the first report is published or a service model change is agreed on by the library staff and leadership. Library leaders must commit to continuing to listen and respond to questions, concerns, and suggestions as changes are implemented. Gathering feedback from frontline staff is crucial for the success of change projects and ensuring that old ways are not reinstated (Farrell 2018). Library leaders can also support building a culture of curiosity and continuous learning through assessing changes made to their service models and empowering staff to be research practitioners in evaluating their work and the work of the library as a whole. The work on communication and supporting staff never ends for library leaders and this should be viewed as an investment to strengthening the foundation for the next opportunity to implement changes.

Conclusion

The process of empowering library staff to participate in creating change in libraries takes both time and work and can result in the sharing of innovative ideas, as well as improved employee morale and job satisfaction. It takes dedication to working with and improving on communication at all levels of the library to build trust in order to have a positive outcome for any proposed changes. Change does not happen overnight and neither does a library staff's commitment to communication or genuine buy-in to the library's and larger organization's strategic vision and goals. These outcomes are the products of clear, consistent commitment and work by library leadership to model the behaviors and inclusivity they want to see in their staff, and giving all staff the opportunity to build the future of the organization together.

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