

The Path of Transformational Change

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Abstract

Purpose: To document the process and strategies used to create transformational change at the operational, organizational and cultural level.

Design/methodology/approach: The vision of transformational change was guided by three principles: building it today, adding value, aligning with the university's strategic plan.

Findings: During a 2008-2009 internal review it became clear that our current services and systems were inhibiting our ability to move forward. To overcome this inertia 8 strategies were developed to lay the foundation for transformational change. These included: creating a framework for change, leveraging outside expertise, building a leadership team, designing a new organizational structure, influencing organizational culture, managing transition, forming operational teams and workgroups, and reflections. The greatest challenge has been to manage library staff fears and expectations. Dealing with both passive and active resistance has required flexibility and a commitment on the part of library administration to engage staff in an on-going dialogue to clarify the vision and to encourage staff to see change as serving both the library's interests and their own self-interest.

Originality/value: The aim of this paper is to showcase tools and strategies for transforming an academic library's organizational culture and structure.

Keywords: academic libraries, Canada, transformational change, organizational change, cultural change

Paper type: Case study

1. Introduction

The University of Lethbridge is a small comprehensive university with 8000 fte. students and 1,348 employees. The University was founded in 1967, in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada.

There is a high level of turn-around in the position of University Librarian. Ten people have held the position during the past 40 years, averaging less than one five year term per administration; this is uncommon in Western Canadian university libraries. In contrast, for others there is low turn-around, with staff averaging 19 years of service, and librarians averaging 14 years of service. Staff are unionized and librarians are tenured faculty. Through-out this paper the phrase "library staff" refers to both staff and librarians.

A new University Librarian (UL), external to the organization, commenced in the position in August 2008. After meeting with all library staff, Deans, the VP Academic and others in the community it was clear that the library staff were "stuck" and unable to move forward. This "stuckness" was apparent at the operational, organizational and cultural level in the Library.

Operationally there was a staffing model based on the concept "everyone does the same thing", discouraging workforce differentiation. (Huselid *et al.*, 2005). The benefit for unionized staff was a high degree of cross-training however, the overall outcome was an organizational culture that discouraged flexibility, innovation, expertise and risk. The organizational structure had flattened to the degree that no one was responsible or accountable. Service was a "bad word". Power was held by a few highly influential individuals who were deeply vested in the status quo.

The challenge for the new UL was to lead staff through a process of transformational change. The UL used the phrase, *moving forward*, to communicate a vision for change and provide a context for new concepts, new ideas, new language and new structure.

This paper presents the strategies that were used for moving forward commencing in 2008. The strategies are addressed chronologically however it is important to note that many of them are continuous and will be used over the next few years. It will likely take five years for transformational change to take hold.

2. Moving Forward (2008-09)

Knowing where to begin is one of the key challenges of change.

Prior to even articulating the first step in “moving forward” it was important to set the stage by beginning to destabilize the existing operational, organizational and cultural model. This was necessary to challenge the status quo, to demonstrate that there was more than one way to approach work, and to make a clear statement of leadership.

The keystone of the library structure, operations and culture was the committee. Numerous committees had been established. Committees met regularly and in all but one committee, membership consisted solely of the librarians. Terms of reference were negligible, if non-existent.

The structure contributed to extremely low staff morale. Staff had given up bringing forward new ideas or initiatives as the predominant feeling was that your work and ideas would be trounced by a committee. The locus of control (or the power) resided in the committee structure. Within this structure there was political polarity, further inhibiting any decision-making or effective action arising from committees. Many library staff found themselves without a voice in library operations. Recognizing that change could not occur within the existing structure the UL disbanded several long-standing core committees.

In lieu of these committees the UL explained that work groups or task forces would be created as necessary. The UL created two work groups to begin an internal review, one to review public services and one to review systems/collections. The work groups were comprised of both staff and librarians, with the membership determined by the UL. It was made clear that not everyone could be on a group, and that these were “work groups” and not committees. Immediately, operational and cultural challenges surfaced.

Limiting the number of participants in a group challenged the belief that “everyone does the same thing”. There was a perception that the right players were not at the table, and discomfort that not all those who previously held considerable power were on the new work groups. Followers of the various power-wielders came to the UL to request that these people be placed on the new work groups.

The work groups were incredibly challenging. There was a lack of trust of each other and of the UL. People’s energy was focused on past wrongs. The actual process of reviewing current practice and service revealed so many convolutions that it became clear to the UL and to some group members that incremental change would not suffice. As a result of this work the UL realized that:

- Due to the “everyone does the same thing” culture and operational model it was impossible to make a change to workflow in one area without it directly impacting other areas – therefore systemic change was necessary
- Organizational politics were so strong and polarized that it stalled/destroyed the development and implementation of new initiatives
- The existing structures were so convoluted that the technical services review group could not explain them and the focus needed to change from a “review” to “building it today”

3. Strategies for Systemic Change

It was clear that initiating a series of incremental changes would be inadequate to the task and that in order to transform the organization, systemic change was crucial. This depth of change required that strategies be identified and implemented that would enable the library staff to “move forward” operationally, organizationally and culturally.

Eight key strategies were created and are in varying stages of implementation. The strategies are:

- creating a framework for change
- leveraging outside expertise
- building a leadership team
- designing a new organizational structure
- influencing the organizational culture
- managing transition
- forming operational teams and work groups
- reflections

Kotter identified eight steps for leading change: establishing a sense of urgency; forming a powerful guiding coalition; creating a vision; communicating the vision; empowering others to act on the vision; planning for short-term wins; consolidating improvements and institutionalizing new approaches. (Kotter, 2007). Many of these steps are embedded within our strategies for systemic change.

3.1 *Creating a framework for change*

For change to be successful people need to know and understand why they are being asked to change. (Wells, 2007). The “why” was communicated by creating a framework for change based on three guiding questions:

1. If we built it today what would it look like?
2. How are we adding value to our students, faculty and staff?
3. How are we supporting the University’s Strategic Plan?

The questions were designed to focus the energy and talent of library staff on moving forward. Kotter framed this as “establishing a sense of urgency” (2007, p. 98).

During the internal review it became clear that incremental change would not suffice and that our operations were designed to accommodate politics and personality not user needs. Rather than spend any more energy on the past, the question, “If we built it today what would it look like?” allowed library staff to look forward. It set a framework for learning about the possibilities through investigating the literature, learning from other organizations and identifying and implementing best practices.

From conversations throughout the university the UL learned that there was a perception that the library “existed for itself”, that it was not user-oriented and that “we” did what we wanted to. This led to the development of the second question, “How are we adding value to our students, faculty and staff?” The purpose of this question is to provide a benchmark for all future decisions – can we articulate how we are adding value to our constituents? If not, then we should not be moving in that direction. Are our current activities adding value? If not, then we need to change them or eliminate them.

When the UL started in August 2008 the University was launching its new strategic plan. A tremendous amount of effort and consultation had gone into the plan. The UL was clear that the

library was part of the overall University and therefore should not be allocating resources into anything that did not support the University's strategic plan. The question, "How are we supporting the University's strategic plan?" was to ensure that all resources: people, funds, space (physical and virtual), technology, collections and information resources, and services were directly linked to supporting specific University strategic directions.

3.2 Creating leverage using outside expertise

The failed attempt at deconstructing the existing selection to access workflow highlighted the need to simply set this analysis aside and begin again. To move forward the focus had to shift from fixing the old to building the new. Objective guidance through the eyes of people not intimately involved in the current environment seemed to offer a viable way to create a compelling case for change. In November 2008, the UL attended a preconference session held by R2 Consulting. R2 began their business in response to the challenges faced by library staff with the advent of electronic resources. R2 has considerable expertise working with academic libraries and provides excellent consulting service to assist library staff to review and change all library operations that occur to information content and collections from selection to access. The University of Lethbridge Library became the first Canadian Academic Library customer of R2.

Following a process of task-based workflow analysis, group meetings, one-on-one meetings, and an all-day, all-staff retreat, R2 summarized their findings in a detailed report that identified a critical need for rethinking priorities and retooling processes. The report made recommendations in the areas of:

- redefining the Lethbridge concept of users and user services
- reconsidering the resource discovery experience
- reducing time and effort spent on acquisitions, cataloguing and processing
- making the management of e-resources a priority
- creating a structure to assist with planning and assessment
- creating a new organizational culture

The R2 Report offered a blueprint for change that reached into every facet of the library, touching every process, service and individual. The document became the leverage that Library Administration required to begin to design a plan for this systemic change.

3.3 Building a leadership team

The previous 9 or 10 administrations in the Library consisted of the UL and one AUL. The duties and responsibilities of the AUL were not clearly articulated nor was the authority. This created a view amongst staff that if you didn't know what to do with something it should "go to the AUL" and a view amongst many librarians that they were not accountable to the AUL. Overtime the workload of this position became overwhelming and the rewards slim. The AUL went on administrative leave and this opened the door to create a new leadership team.

Success required a strong leadership team that understood and embraced the vision of transformational change. Kotter called this a "guiding coalition" (2007, p. 97). There was tremendous support from the VP Academic to create the new leadership team. Existing resources were reallocated and two Associate University Librarian (AUL) positions were created; AUL Client Services and Facilities (CSAF) and the AUL Information Systems and Technical Services (ISTS). The two AUL positions were posted so that both internal and external candidates could apply.

3.4 Designing a new organizational structure for transformational change

The organizational structure of the library had changed numerous times over the years. It evolved from a traditional hierarchical model to a completely flat one. The flat model reflected the

organizational culture of “we all do the same thing”, managing by committee and no clear lines of responsibility or accountability. The existing structure was not able to support transformational change and a new model was necessary. It was important to create a clear reporting structure and to organize the operational requirements of the library based on service, not politics.

The report from R2 was released and presented to all library staff in early May 2009. There were tight timelines to create a new model and to assign duties to the librarians that were relevant and supportive of the new organizational structure. Duties for staff may be changed and assigned throughout the year while faculty must receive their annual assignment prior to June 30. This left a minimum amount of time to create and introduce a new organizational model and to assign to the librarians new duties, expectations and accountabilities to support the model. Furthermore the two new AULs were not starting until July.

In keeping with “building it today” and “adding value” the UL designed an organizational model based on service. Three circles were used to demonstrate fluidity and overlap. Each AUL was given authority, responsibility and accountability for a circle, with the third circle being “shared”. The word “services” was inserted throughout to reinforce the role of the library within the university (APPENDIX 1). The new model consisted of Learning Services, Graduate Student Services and Outreach Services, under the AUL CSAF and Research Services, Discovery Systems, Data Integrity and Acquisitions under the AUL ISTS. Library operations formed the third overlapping circle.

Definitions were created for each heading in the model (APPENDIX 2). Work was assigned to librarians in a primary area, for example Research Services, and in some cases in a second area, for example, Outreach Services. All librarians had duties assigned in library operations. Several librarians were also assigned an innovative project in an area that would help move us forward, for example, scholarly communication. This was a significant departure from the previous model where there was little detail and little differentiation in the assigned duties.

3.5 Influencing organizational culture

“Cultural change is one of the most important factors to consider but one of the hardest to implement.” (Preston, 2004, p. 33). It is difficult to change because it is intangible – you can’t see culture. You can observe its manifestation through behavior, morale, and language.

The Library’s culture gave precedence to the preferences of library staff over the needs of the students, faculty and staff. Rules and regulations abounded. Staff were not empowered to make decisions. Innovation was discouraged. Status quo ruled. Morale was low and many of the library staff had lost their voice through fear of negative repercussions from their colleagues. There was very little sense of personal responsibility and accountability. The language painted a picture of an inflexible and hostile environment.

There was a high degree of complaint from students and faculty about the treatment they received from library staff as evidenced by the comments sent via the online suggestion/feedback box.

The initial strategy to influence the negative culture was to insert new language. Each change was designed to open the way for new thinking. The words “moving forward” and “service” were worked into every communication, presentation, and discussion. “Work groups” and “task groups” replaced “committees”. “Library staff” became inclusive of both staff and librarians.

Meaningless position titles were removed. The word coordinator occurred in some titles, however the title had no meaning as the coordinators admitted that they had no power, and were not accountable or responsible for the outcomes in the areas that they coordinated. Many of the librarians self-identified as “subject librarians”; all are now referred to as librarians with subject work as part of their assigned duties rather than their key role or title.

Changes in behavior and morale will evolve in response to the implementation of the operational and organizational changes. With the arrival of the two AULs, “ways to say yes” has been inserted in all communication. The leadership team models positive behavior. Poor workplace behavior is addressed and effective behavior is acknowledged, encouraged and rewarded. A desired outcome of these changes is to improve morale and build a strong service culture.

3.6 Managing transition

Managing the transition between our current/previous operations, organization and culture and what we are becoming is critical to transformative change. This is a very challenging time for the library staff to work in as there is nothing solid – many processes, procedures and structures are gone and new ones have not yet replaced them. There is uncertainty, resistance, and lack of trust. Transition is also a time where new ideas form, emerge and creativity can flourish (Bridges, 2000).

Bridges identified three stages of transition: “*endings*, a *neutral zone* and *new beginnings*” (1994, p. 195). During “endings” people break from the existing models of “how we do things here”. In the “neutral zone” people are caught between the old ways and not yet knowing the new ways, and in “new beginnings” the new models are in place and people have successfully adapted and changed. The challenge is that at any given time, and in any given change, the same person might find themselves at any stage of the transition. From an operational and cultural perspective this can create low tolerance and conflict between colleagues as people fail to understand why some people are moving along, some are resisting and some are doing both.

To help manage this process a transition team was created. The small team consisted of the UL, a staff member and a librarian. A “moving forward” site was created on the intranet to provide a central source for communication. Documents, power points and any other information related to the changes were posted there. An anonymous electronic question box was created and everyone was encouraged to use it. Monthly library staff meetings were held where information was presented and questions and comments addressed. An irregular ‘What’s Up? What’s Happening’ email was sent out to the internal email list to ensure a mechanism for providing updates between the monthly meetings. Finally, the UL continued to communicate that she had an “open door” policy and that anyone was welcome to talk to her at any time. This strategy has helped to manage uncertainty.

The individuals who formed the previous core power structure continue to be actively and passively resistant and have no trust with Library Administration or with any of their colleagues who do not hold their views. Forming new operational teams and work groups has helped to build trust and minimize resistance for the majority of staff.

4. Moving Forward (2009-10)

4.1 Forming operational teams and work groups

The R2 Report (2009) provided a framework for change and led the newly formed Library Administrative team to undertake a series of initiatives constructed to move staff into what might best be described as a learning environment. This learning environment was designed to challenge staff to step outside of their traditional roles and routines while at the same time providing them with the training, support and encouragement to allow them to gain confidence in their ability to be successful in this changing environment.

One way in which this learning environment was fostered was through the creation of new working groups that crossed existing departmental boundaries. For example, staff working in Technical Services and staff working in Information Systems had largely done their jobs with little more than a passing and sometimes grudging acknowledgement of the clear overlap in their work, especially as it related to electronic resources and the library’s integrated library system. This staff division had been

a mirror image of the operational division, with responsibility for Technical Services and for Information Systems held by two individuals whose interests were often competing. With responsibility for both departments now falling under the umbrella of the new AUL, ISTS, building teams based on achieving service goals became possible.

As a starting point a small interdepartmental team was brought together to lead an audit of the library's integrated library system, with a view to both re-vamping the existing system and laying the ground for the implementation of several new modules including a new discovery platform. The individuals chosen to be part of this team had several qualities in common, they were well-regarded by their fellow staff, had a shared knowledge base and were not completely averse to change. As no one on staff, including those charged with the responsibility of administering the integrated library system, had ever had training specific to these responsibilities the first step was to invest in high-level skill development. Significant dollars were spent sending this core team for training with the outcomes reaching well beyond the obvious goal of having a well-trained staff. Perhaps the most significant outcome of the training was to provide the team with the opportunity to begin to build new relationships based on respect and a sense of shared purpose. Further, these individuals became increasingly supportive of plans for change and were able to share their optimism with their colleagues.

The integrated library system audit process provided an additional opportunity to engage staff in operational change and the success of this initiative is at heart a direct reflection of the substantial gains that were being made in effecting change at the cultural level. As much of the literature on organizational culture points out, changing culture is difficult because so much of the culture of an organization is rooted in the collective history of the organization (Schneider *et al.*, 1996). The ILS audit engaged staff in a practical analysis of their work within that system, but widened into a discussion of the "why of things", that is, staff began to question whether the work served the library or the users of the library. Staff are beginning to find their voice and to engage with their colleagues in new and creative ways.

4.2 Reflections

The plan for change and the strategies used to begin to effect change at the operational, organizational and cultural level have required constant revisiting and updating as some strategies served their purpose, some need reconsideration and some are continuous. At the operational level the leadership team is working to be sure that the model is right. While an organizational model based on service provides the best framework for designing services, there may be a need to combine clearly overlapping service circles, for example the Research Services circle with the Graduate Student Services circle. Further, as new roles and responsibilities grow out of the changing environment, there may be a need to restructure service points, for example, combining the circulation service desk with the reference desk.

This process of revisiting and realigning strategies is much more than simply "tinkering" with the model. Paton stressed the importance of library leadership recognizing and responding to resistance to change (Paton, *et al.*, 2008). Dealing with both passive and active resistance requires flexibility and a commitment on the part of library administration not to a rigid plan, but to strategies that engage staff in an on-going dialogue to clarify the vision and to encourage staff to see change as serving both the library's interests and their own self-interest. Dealing with the obstacles to change is not an insignificant undertaking and in fact may be viewed as the most difficult piece to manage. Considerable effort is required to deal with obstacles and the impact of this effort is seen in a tendency for the leadership team to over-think communications and to sometimes get caught up in discussions of whether a particular situation requires intervention or whether it would be best to let certain instances of poor workplace behavior go in the interests of the "big picture".

In an effort to ensure that the leadership does not allow the daily stresses of managing the obstacles to result in negative attitudes or a feeling of being "burnt-out", the group has developed its own set of

strategies for “care and feeding”. These include engaging in team-building opportunities through attendance at library conferences, developing a supportive environment where the division of administrative responsibilities does not preclude a sharing of those responsibilities, a conscious change in language to reflect a positive view of the environment and, perhaps most importantly, a sense of humor that helps to relieve the stress of the most difficult challenges.

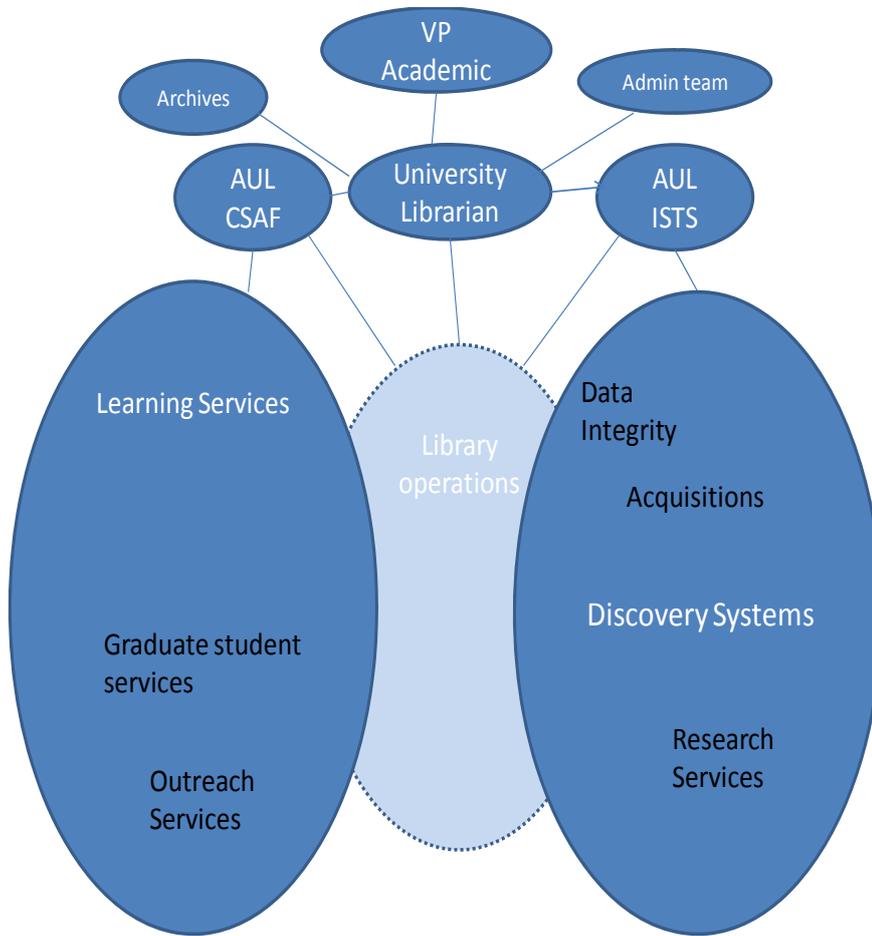
As a leadership team we are focused on action and moving forward. Kotter noted that change initiatives often fail when there is no shared vision – that “it is insufficient to have only plans, directives and programs” (2007, p. 99). Our challenge is to continue to communicate the vision, at every level and at every opportunity in the midst of our “plans, directives and programs”. Of course the library does not exist in a vacuum, and one of our ongoing strategies for ensuring success internally has been to engage with our external, University-wide community. This strategy includes working with University administration to gain support for the moving-forward initiatives, communicating and seeking input from faculty to ensure they feel included in the process, and taking every opportunity to talk with colleagues outside of the library about the plan.

The final test of a successful change is that what was once new becomes accepted and adopted into the organizational culture (Kotter, 2007; Horn, 2008). While the University of Lethbridge has not yet passed this final test substantial progress had been made on our path towards achieving transformational change.

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APPENDIX 1



APPENDIX 2

Definitions of Areas of Focus, June 11, 2009

These definitions may expand or narrow as necessary.

Learning Services: Supports undergraduate student success: offering a multi-layered program to address information literacy services both physical and virtual. Including but not limited to: opt-in or user initiated services, workshops and events, through to in-class, and course-integrated instruction and curriculum support. Develops on-campus partnerships. Includes assessment and working on groups, committees and task forces.

Outreach Services: Supports FNMI and international students. Provides out-of-library service to all students; participates in larger student campus initiatives (booths, orientation etc) and implements co-library initiatives arising from partnerships with public, regional and college libraries. Includes assessment and working on groups, committees and task forces.

Graduate Student Services: Supports the unique needs of graduate students. Provides services, such as, but not limited to supporting graduate student research, theses, scholarly output, and information management. Includes assessment and working on groups, committees and task forces.

Research Services: Enhances research support for faculty, establishing the library as the central resource for digital collections, scholarly communication issues, and new publishing models. Research Services will provide a suite of services and expertise to all faculty, staff and students including, but not limited to: gis, data, maps, government documents, digital initiatives and research assistance software. Includes assessment and working on groups, committees and task forces.

Discovery Systems –Facilitates effective, user-friendly and seamless access to the library’s virtual and physical collections and services. Includes discovery tools and systems such as the Web, Millennium, OPAC, ERM, federated searching, knowledge base etc. Includes assessment and working on groups, committees and task forces.

Data Integrity: Sets and monitors standards for all forms of metadata; sampling and quality control; assessment; statistics and administrative reports. Includes assessment and working on groups, committees and task forces.

Acquisitions: implements R2 recommendations. Includes assessment and working on groups, committees and task forces.

Library operations: Access Services; Reference Services; and Collections. Includes assessment and working on groups, committees and task forces.