New Directions Snapshot on cultural, organizational and values changes

Overview

From ALA’s 2007 Annual Meeting, where innovation in the technological and human realms dominated the program, to the literatures of business and of librarianship, the question of how to foster innovation within large organizations has been discussed extensively for at least ten years. There’s broad agreement on what an innovative organization looks like, and academic libraries, like Berkeley, to a large extent represent the antithesis of the “nimble,” fast-changing, early-adopter, business culture that is the new ideal. To become more innovative, an organization must make both human and technological changes. While it would be foolhardy to abandon the advantageous parts of our elephantine nature (stability, reliability, quality control), libraries need to incorporate some of the characteristics of entrepreneurial organizations to increase relevance. Just as Web 2.0 has made everyone a content creator, innovative organizations make all staff responsible for coming up with improvements.

National Trends

As has been pointed out by staff and in the literature, we must become flexible, responsive and forward thinking, shifting from a culture of perfection and moving toward a culture of continuous beta. But how to accomplish the change? In both the literature, and in staff responses, responsibility is consistently laid at the feet of management to provide the conditions under which people feel safe and empowered to risk proposing and implementing new ideas.

To support staff in adopting this mindset, libraries need to

- redefine ‘success,’ accepting the notion that innovation may involve false starts
- demonstrate that it values and encourages experimentation and risk-taking by rewarding efforts
- let ideas flow from the bottom up, not the top down—to invert the hierarchy
- make trend spotting part of a job description or the responsibility of an “innovation team”
- provide “sandboxes” or “skunk works” web spaces, where experiments and pilots can be safely tested
- foster a culture of collaboration by encouraging informal teams, and rewarding collaborative work to implement innovative ideas
- be more user-centered

Local Issues

There remains a degree of cynicism among staff about the will and capacity of the organization to change as desired. In the early part of this decade, the Library underwent an open process to address organizational culture issues that had surfaced over a very difficult period. A widely held perception is that the current environment is
not conducive to creative and innovative thinking and doing. Staff are wary about the Library’s ability to adopt and follow through on ‘new’ directions. Specific issues mentioned by staff include:

- We have **generational differences** in culture; staff retirements in the coming 5 +/- years will change our culture inevitably
- A lack of broad understanding and **agreement on goals and objectives** with which to align pilots and experiments
  - Concern about **balancing experimentation with the need ‘to get the work done’**; producing fixed, stable outcomes as well as concentrating on and accepting continuous development and fine-tuning
- Where will we find **time** to devote to innovative thinking?
  - **Innovation is an ‘add on’** to existing job duties; concern about staff burnout; staff need opportunities to test and retest, as well as to assess costs and benefits
  - **The rapid pace of technological advances** and new products keeps staff off-balance
- **Organizational structure** problems, specifically:
  - Can the organization structure itself enable staff to be more than superficially aware of new products and technologies?
  - **Council and committee structure** are not viable for moving ideas forward quickly; we put emphasis on process over product;
  - **Inflexible bureaucracy** with too many layers; can’t quickly assess and green light good ideas or squash the bad
- **Fear/Lack of trust**, specifically:
  - **Staff will be penalized** if the result isn’t perfect; staff are ambivalent or uncertain about what it means to work in a culture that fosters innovation;
  - **Staff aren’t sufficiently motivated** with incentives and rewards to take risks ... beyond the borders of one’s primary job assignment
  - **Who is responsible** for innovation: everyone, or just a dedicated “innovation” team?
  - **An environment of shifting sand**, that’s safe nonetheless.
  - Ideas and **input are often solicited, but often not acted upon**; cumbersome process means staff not always sure their ideas are still in play.

**Starting Points**

Several starter ideas were put forth, each grounded in the spirit of positioning the organization and the staff as a whole to meet new directions challenges swiftly, collaboratively and innovatively. The ideas are not mutually exclusive.

1) Create a New Directions Institute – (from M. Temberg’s blog posting)
   The ND Institute would focus on training and skill development paths for future roles in the Library. The curriculum would be designed to prepare staff for whatever “different” human resource demands come out of the ND Initiative process. Institute modules might focus on:
   - Learning to work in an effective team environment.
2) Build knowledge and mechanisms within the organization that support team work and innovative thinking (from K Munro’s blog posting).
   - Building knowledge about best practices for teams;
   - Lectures on organization development topics by Cal faculty or knowledgeable staff.
   - Build mechanisms to encourage creativity, innovation, and initiative into the library’s administrative structure.

3) Offer ‘safe spaces’ for experimentation (from B Quigley’s blog posting).
   - Create an innovation lab or teams to develop and experiment with innovative technologies and services. It would include a mix of information science, information technology and library specialists, and utilize iSchool interns. …create a few “innovation teams” of library staff responsible for developing and experimenting with innovative technologies. –Examples include MIT Libraries’ Betas, University of Pennsylvania Libraries’ PennLabs, Vanderbilt University Library’s Test Pilot

4) Contract with an external consultant to lead a process to help build the Library’s capacity for innovation and creativity. Ternberg posted Ten Principles of Change Management for Achieving New Directions.

As we contemplate today’s landscape, we thought it instructive to review relevant past activities and actions to understand what some staff have undergone organizationally that might be feeding into skepticism – when we hear ‘been there, done that’ what does it mean? In the early part of this decade, the Library underwent an open process to address organizational culture issues that had surfaced over a very difficult period. Here’s an excerpt from a document produced during the Organizational Development process in the early 2000s:

“A large cohort of staff may retire during the decade, presenting the challenge of ensuring Library continuity during a period of unprecedented technological development.” “...the technological and functional challenges affecting the library world will require constant training for existing staff so they can stay current with best practices.” “...Library’s efforts to reenergize its culture....appropriate directions for organizational renewal.”
The following documents provide substantial background and insight with many findings, statements and recommendations that continue to have resonance. All are accessible from the Library Staff page, Administrative Reports Archive, Human Resources http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/AboutLibrary/reports/

http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/AboutLibrary/reports/orgdev_implement.html

Org Dev - Add to our growing list of Library Milestones! (2000-2002) 
http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/AboutLibrary/reports/orgdev_milestones.html

Report of the Organizational Culture Committee 1/ 2001 
http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/AboutLibrary/reports/occfinalreport.html

Statement of Purpose - developed by Library Staff and endorsed by Cabinet 
http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/AboutLibrary/purpose.html

Statement of Values - developed by Library Staff and endorsed by Cabinet 
http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/AboutLibrary/values.html

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