Creating Change without Chaos: Preparing Libraries for the 21st Century

Sheila Corrall
University of Reading, Reading, United Kingdom

Sheila Corrall was appointed University Librarian at Reading in 1995. She was previously Director of Library & Information Services at Aston University in Birmingham, and before that worked for the British Library and in the public library sector. Currently she is chair of the UK Office for Library and Information Networking Advisory Committee, the BUBL Steering Group and the Ariadne Project Board, as well as serving on the British Council Libraries and Information Advisory Committee and the Executive Board of SCONUL. She has lectured and published widely on professional and management topics. Her particular areas of interest include service quality, the management of change and the development of the electronic library.

Abstract

Library planning and management must change significantly if services are to survive and thrive in the future. Current issues and pressures present complex challenges for managers, including the difficulties of coping with the economic and electronic imperatives, and judging the pace of change. We need a strategic management framework to transform our visionary dreams into concrete actions. This means thinking strategically, involving stakeholders and planning with partners to develop services tailored to customer priorities.

At a practical level one of the hardest tasks is to manage time and priorities, to strike the right balance between maintaining existing

service to an acceptable standard and working on improvements for the future. The world of business offers models, tool and techniques which can usefully be adopted and adapted by library managers. Strategic planning and total quality management require a long-term commitment to getting things right, but it is also important to find ways of showing quick visible results to impress paymasters and motivate staff. The focus of staff training will shift from specifying and testing job-related skills and competencies to developing capabilities and managing talent. Organisational structures will follow some general trends, but must be designed to suit individual institutions at their particular stage of development. Structures need to be fit for their purpose and fluid to enable progress.

Communication is the key to success in the change process and must be managed actively. Effective library managers will be leaders with vision, people who are flexible and listen to the views of others, but who are also decisive and prepared to take responsibility for change.

Preparing Libraries for the 21st Century

Library planning and management must change significantly if library services are to survive and thrive in the future. Current issues and pressures present complex challenges for library managers. The environmental factors that are forcing change are well known and have been extensively documented (for example, in previous papers at this symposium). It is convenient to categorise these change drivers and consider them under four headings or perspectives - technology, economics, politics and socio-demographic aspects. I have used this framework in the past - notably in an article on libraries in the information society in *New Library World*[1] - and while it is still valid as a starting-point, what is more important now is to consider how these variables are interacting, and assess their combined effects on library and information services in the present and future.

Advances in technology offer more options for delivering and managing services differently and better than before, but the publicity and excitement generated by Internet developments has raised the expectations and demands of our users and funders to an unprecedented level. Add to this the continuing downward trends in budgets generally, the upward spiral-

ling of publication prices, the unpredictability of IT investment, the determination of public and private sector bodies to reduce operating costs and cut out 'non-core' activities and the massive shifts - indeed transformations - in society at large, and we start to see the scale and complexity of the challenge.

We are working in *a challenging environment.* Customisation and immediate desktop delivery is the expectation of a society seduced by the hype of the Internet - people want instant access to information, tailored to their personal needs. Low-budget and cost-conscious operations are demanded by purseholders, but with an assumption of continuous quality improvement of the products and services offered. We are encouraged to "think strategically", often required to specify strategic objectives, development strategies, etc., but there is no time for formal planning processes - no questions allowed, as bosses demand instant answers. The service development, which is generally desired by both library staff and users, inevitably has to be managed alongside, and in addition to, existing services - both groups are notoriously reluctant to allow withdrawal or cessation of activities to facilitate growth or diversification. Convergence of technologies has affected the management of operations and services, resulting in blurring of boundaries and confusion of roles: subscription agents have become information providers; libraries and IT/media departments are regrouping and jostling for positions. Professional competencies are under scrutiny: information professionals don't know whether they are about to take over the world - or be made redundant!

Meeting the Challenge of Change

The challenge for managers includes the difficulties of coping with the economic and electronic imperatives and judging the pace of change. We need a strategic management framework to transform our visionary dreams into concrete actions. I see this in the following terms: to survive and thrive in the future, we must have a *"fast-track"* process for articulating strategy and a *developmental* approach to operations management. The traditional (lengthy) strategic planning exercises of the 1970s and 1980s will not work in the current environment. Tactical and operational planning to translate strategies into action programmes also needs attention; all too often we hear sorry stories of strategic change initiatives that failed to deliver, and the disappointment and cynicism engendered as a result.

Getting the best out of people is vital in a climate of downsizing and delayering, and we shall have to think more about designing *roles for individuals*, rather than describing jobs and specifying skills required. Managers must have the insight and mentoring capacity to spot - and manage - talent and build *capability* among existing staff, and this in turn requires a more flexible view of organisational structures. Structures will follow general trends (for example, cross-functional and self-managing teams) but must be designed to suit individual institutions at their particular stage of development; they will need to be *adaptive* and *fluid* to support fulfilment of changing strategic priorities and to reflect the strengths and styles of individuals and institutions. While far-sighted vision and long-term commitment are desirable aspects, it is essential to find ways of achieving *quick, visible results* to impress funders, motivate staff and (naturally) delight the customers. *Communication, confidence,* and *creativity* are the keys to success in the change process. These are all important issues, but I shall concentrate in this paper on developing our planning processes, at both strategic and operational levels, and facilitating organisational change.

A Fast-Track Strategic Management Framework

While 'strategy' has become one of the most over-worked words in the management vocabulary of the 1990s, 'planning' has gone out of fashion. Management gurus such as Tom Peters have told us to burn our plans and scrap our strategic planning processes. Henry Mintzberg has devoted a whole book to the shortcomings of long-range planning, referring to a "calculating style of management" which places too much reliance on so-called 'hard data' that takes so long to harden that the information becomes irrelevant.[2] As I have argued before (for example, in an article on 'planning for a better future' in *The Law Librarian*[3]) it is during turbulent times that people in organisations derive most benefit from having a shared view of their overall aims and constraints, as this enables day-to-day planning and decisions to respond to unforeseen issues more flexibly and quickly at the customer interface. The models and matrices, tools and techniques of strategic management and marketing, as used in the business world, can be adopted and adapted by library managers - and many have done so successfully.[4]

In this context, I define strategic planning as "the continuous development of objectives and action programmes through a devolved interactive process". The process involves:

ERIC Full Text Provided by ERIC

- *scanning widely* - keeping a watch on trends and developments, externally and internally, and assessing their implications;
- *integrating projects* - combining people from different disciplines and departments, from within and outside the library, to solve problems or develop products/services;
- *involving stakeholders* - inviting input to plans from all those with an actual or potential interest in the library, including funders, customers, suppliers, external and internal partners, and of course library staff;
- *managing expectations* - raising awareness of the key opinion formers (KOFs) among these groups of the resource implications of proposals;
- *transferring learning* - using past experience, failures and successes, including peer comparisons, to inform future plans;
- *adjusting resources* - having systems and procedures to prompt and permit movement of funds and staff as required.

As already indicated, one of our primary aims must be to achieve quick flexible responses to customer needs through delegated decision-making. Doing this, we can not only tap the often wasted expertise of front-line staff, and 'empower' them in the process, but also liberate the top team by releasing senior management time for areas frequently neglected - such as communication and coaching. This should increase satisfaction for everyone.

The *context* for strategic planning today is very much one of 'planning-in-a-hurry', with inherent tensions between the pressure from institutional top management to produce results quickly and a desire of the library managers for participation and commitment from all concerned.

The *content* of planning discussions must focus now on a reduced subset of core elements requiring more discipline, insight and intelligence than has historically characterised library planning exercises - where the wish to involve, develop and encourage people has often resulted in debates on unimportant details and long lists of unrealisable projects. The essentials are:

- *planning assumptions* - based on an informed assessment of environmental forces and market trends;
- the *mission* - a statement of your purpose and functions (why you exist, what you do, whose needs you meet);

- a *vision* of where you want to be in five to ten years time, the desired future state of information services in your organisation - which may not take the form of a traditional library;
- *'strategic thrusts'* - the prime areas for investment of resource (time, money, effort), probably no more than three to five;
- *performance measures* - related to the above, and ideally no more than a handful of key indicators enabling you to track progress and success;
- *financial projections* - at the very least some commentary on resource implications of the proposed strategy. It is surprising how many library strategic plans have been supposedly completed/approved without commitment or provision of the funding required to achieve the objectives stated!

The product or output from a strategic planning or strategic review exercise which is a continuous process is more likely to take the form of a series of statements than a single end-product. These documents, which must be succinct and spare, written in clear jargon-free language, will provide a framework for policy-making and decision-taking. They may include briefing/discussion papers, management reports and project proposals, as well as a *'family of plans'* supporting the top-level statements of vision, mission, etc. (such as the plans of teams or specialist units within the library, marketing and business plans relating to particular products or services). Together they form a *'hierarchy of objectives'*, taking the reader through from service strategies to operational tactics.

Developmental Operations Management

Why do so many strategic change initiatives fail? We can all point to examples of promises not kept, problems not solved, projects scaled down or abandoned, planned improvements that did not happen. Failing to take full account of the financial implications of strategic objectives and to negotiate and secure the resource base for change is one reason. Another (perhaps the most common) is not following through from strategy to action - not articulating your operational plans and assigning responsibilities for getting things done. To translate your 'grand plan' into a successful cultural change programme, you must follow up your general statements of intent with specific action plans and budget provision, with tasks, targets and timetables.

At a practical level, one of the hardest things to get right is to manage time and priorities, to strike the right balance between maintaining existing services to an acceptable standard and working on improvements for the future. This is the classic dilemma - managing 'business-as-usual' alongside development and innovation. It is not easily resolved, but must not be ignored. A pre-requisite is to agree (as part of the strategic review process) your strategic priorities - the broad thrusts or major directions in which your library must move to realise the vision. This then enables you to identify the areas where success is essential, improvement is necessary and/or concentrated effort will bring the greatest benefit - your key result areas (KRAs), which must become a prominent element in your tactical and operational planning.

The difficulty of judging and achieving an appropriate balance between development work and day-to-day operations in terms of time management and staff deployment is a real challenge. If service developments take precedence over routine activities, standards may slip and you risk losing customer support when you most need it. But if you let "the urgent crowd out the important" and neglect development, your services will lag farther and farther behind competitors, which will also alienate customers - though the effects will take longer to show. Sometimes, with major projects (such as installing a new computer system or moving into a new building) you may be able to release staff from normal duties for full-time project work. Several commentators on library management structures have argued that we should have staff *permanently* assigned to *development teams,* following the model of product development teams in industry, and some libraries have actually done this - notably those operating converged library and IT services. For technically complex projects with critical deadlines it makes sense not to expose people to the frequent interruptions that occur in most service operations, but few managers of small and medium-sized libraries can afford the luxury of full-time project staff. Development teams then have to become part of a matrix management arrangement or *parallel organisation structure,* which at least has the advantage of ensuring service developers keep in touch with day-to-day operations.

Another cause of failure is to allow the desire for collective commitment and team ownership to confuse the issue of individual responsibility. It is essential to assign tasks and targets to named individuals and to spend time identifying enthusiasts for particular initiatives to drive the work forward and act as *'product champions'.*

Operational plans are the key to *connecting the strategy with everyday life.* Effective operational planning will enable you to integrate strategic and operational objectives. The essentials are:

- *be realistic* about your objectives, basing them on an informed assessment of the time and other resources required;
- *break down* assignments into manageable components, providing intermediate objectives or 'milestones';
- establish a *review process* that enables you to monitor, evaluate and rethink plans and priorities in the light of experience and circumstance.

Managers seldom give enough thought to the frequency, level and timing of reviews: it is important for senior management to keep in touch with how things are going, but not to the extent that colleagues feel that they are not trusted to get on with their work. Monthly monitoring ought to be delegated to service managers/team leaders, with less frequent reports to the senior team concentrating on any problems identified, proposed rescheduling or other resource implications. A key point here is the creation of an *enabling climate of trust and support,* so that people are not afraid to admit difficulties or mistakes, and know they can get help if necessary.

The *context* for operational planning is this business of translating the grand plan into an action programme, but there is also the issue of tracking back from tasks to strategy. The plans themselves need to serve as both practical *working tools* for daily use and a *quick reminder* of the library's strategic objectives.

To fulfil this purpose, the *content* of operational plans must include:

- the *mission* and *objectives* for the whole library;
- *functional objectives* for departments/teams/specialists units;
- their *priorities* and *goals* for the current year - including not only planned service developments and improvements, but also significant regular or recurring activities, defined here as those where timing is critical and/or the time commitment is substantial (for example, in a university library, induction tours for new students).

If you do not include both activities associated with the forward strategy and routine responsibilities, you will probably have problems with time management. For both categories, as well as assigning *names to tasks*, you

need to specify *targets with numbers and dates* so that progress can be monitored monthly.

Production of such documents is much easier now with the widespread availability of suitable software, enabling networked access and frequent updating to record progress and incorporate additions and changes. Use of spreadsheet/database packages facilitates sorting by date, section, individuals, etc., and it is also becoming easier to combine this type of data with other management information (for example, output from library computer systems and budget reports). Some libraries - notably Cranfield University in the UK - are starting to use Intranet technologies to disseminate planning information and supporting documentation to staff.[5]

While electronic communication offers the desirable benefit of reducing the volume of paper in people's in-trays, do not overlook the motivational aspects of periodic distribution of hard-copy versions to individuals and prominent display on noticeboards of graphical output showing volume of day-to-day activities and progress towards key goals.

Creating Change without Chaos

While change has become a way of life for most of us, managers still need to pay attention to managing the process of transformation. Experience suggests three things to bear in mind before you begin to plan and manage the change process.

1. *Resources (time and money)* - everything always takes longer and costs more than originally estimated.
2. *Fear of the Unknown* - some people welcome and relish change as stimulating and exciting, but most are worried or disconcerted by it, and many find it quite frightening.
3. *Evolution or revolution* - there is a significant difference between *incremental* and *discontinuous* change, and this should be reflected in how you communicate and manage the change process.

Following on from the above, and again drawing on personal and published experience, I suggest five factors to consider as a means of easing the process.

1. *Sharing the strategy* - know where you are going and what you are about. If you approach strategic planning as outlined above, this will give

your colleagues an overall frame of reference even if many details are unknown.

2. *Putting people first* - pay attention to their feelings, remembering that perceptions are often more potent and just as 'real' to the individuals concerned as actual facts, so managers must take them fully into account.
3. *Holistic view* - try to get everyone to focus on the 'big picture', the wider context of the external environment in which they are working, and the longer-term implications of recent developments and current trends.
4. *Creating a culture* - promote the view that change is the norm, so that you begin to create a climate that expects and accepts it, and build a culture which assumes continuous development, innovation and risk-taking.
5. *Talking it through* - communicate, communicate, communicate... openly and honestly, formally and informally, and far more often than you think could possibly be necessary!

The following advice is drawn from various writings on change management in the library field.

Ten tips to help get messages across:

1. Explain the reasons for change and state the benefits - to the organisation as a whole, and for individuals, but don't exaggerate.
2. Admit the downside and the risks, and show that you have some contingency plans if things don't work out as anticipated.
3. Identify concerns and provide reassurances (for example, that there will be training for new roles).
4. Involve everyone - invite them to contribute to the more detailed planning and practical aspects of implementation.
5. Allow people plenty of time to absorb information before giving them more.
6. Observe their reactions, listen carefully to their comments and questions, and make sure you are seen to respond to them.
7. Tap the 'rumour mill' - enlist the help of supervisors and spokespeople to obtain feedback on how messages are really being received.
   (For example, at Reading University Library, during our current

restructuring process, we formed a group of 'Change Advisers' drawn from a cross-section of staff, to act as a sounding board and advise senior management on the change process.)

8. Repeat messages as often as seems necessary and vary the methods and modes of communication.

   (At Reading, I have tried position papers, electronic mail, news-sheets, open meetings - with circulated transcriptions of questions and answers generated - and 'drop-in workshops' to discuss our mission, vision and values, as a pragmatic way of enabling all staff to participate in a large organisation.)

9. Treat people as individuals, recognising both group and personal concerns.

   (In addition to one-to-one and group meetings at Reading, we conducted a 'staff preferences survey' to ascertain people's interests and expertise, as well as asking for general comments; the response rate was more than 95%.)

10. Relate change to continuing professional values - point to continuity in constancy of purpose, commitment to service ethos, etc., to remind colleagues that some things remain unchanged despite appearances to the contrary.

The library leader's role in this process is crucial. Although I have talked about "balancing the business", in reality it is more of a juggling act, requiring constant attention and rethinking in relation to events. Change is a constant and we must manage it to our advantage, and this in effect means *creating* change rather than managing or coping with it, or having it forced upon us.

The role of the change agent has shifted from that of the know-it-all expert, selling staff his recommended solutions, to one of a facilitator-with-a-vision, coaching her colleagues in problem-solving techniques. The world around us is in chaos, but it is our job to create a climate of (relative) calm - a climate where people can perform effectively, where they are stimulated and excited, but stretched rather than stressed, and exhilarated not exhausted. Successful leaders will be those who inspire confidence, who are flexible and listen to the views of others, but ultimately decisive and prepared *to take personal responsibility* for change.

References

1. CORRALL, Sheila. Academic libraries in the information society. *New Library World,* 96, (1120), pp. 35-42, 1995.
2. MINTZBERG, Henry. *The rise and fall of strategic planning.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall International, 1994.
3. CORRALL, Sheila. Strategic management of information resources: planning for a better future. *The Law Librarian,* 26, (3), pp. 399-403, 1995.
4. CORRALL, Sheila. *Strategic planning for library and information services.* London: Aslib, 1994. (Final section contains a short annotated reading list including case studies of library planning in public, national and academic libraries.)
5. BEVAN, Simon and EVANS, Janet. Managing the Library Intranet at Cranfield University. *Managing Information,* 3, (9), pp. 38-40, 1996.

Further Reading

CORRALL, Sheila. An evolving service: managing change. In: Dempsey, Lorcan et al. *Networking and the future of libraries 2: managing the intellectual record.* London: Library Association Publishing, 1995. pp. 45-61.

CORRALL, Sheila. *Strategic management of information services: a planning handbook.* Aldershot: Aslib Gower, 1997 [In press]

ERIC Full Text Provided by ERIC