

Continuous Organizational Development—Teamwork, Learning Leadership, and Measurement

Charles B. Lowry

Success is not a place at which one arrives but rather . . . the spirit with which one undertakes and continues the journey.

Alex Noble

Early in my career, a colleague for whom I have great respect said to me, “The great libraries of the future will be those with great staffs.” There was a rhetorical flourish in this statement intended to make a vital point. We could not simply rely on massive collections to provide information for the academy—it was necessary to pay attention to our human resources and, by extension, our organizations. By that time in the mid-1970s, the so-called “golden age of library collecting” was ending, and the “age of access” was beginning.

This age of access has left us with diminished power to define our future—without significant support from allies outside our organizations.¹ Libraries must be resilient organizations that have the strength to sustain themselves as partners in the learning and scholarly enterprises. Among other things, this means paying attention to the critical importance of the human side as an essential feature of coping with our challenges, as I have argued before.

The management literature to which we so often look for guidance fundamentally emphasizes the role of managers and leadership. As important as I think these are, I also believe the external challenges to academic libraries are so great that to achieve great success in meeting them means the intelligence, energy and commitment of all staff must be mobilized to find our way. In effect, every staff member must, in some measure, become a manager and a leader—and the organization must treat them as though they have a brain in their head. I am not suggesting a lock-step mentality or a monolithic organizational vision is desirable—or, for that matter, achievable. I am suggesting that

there is afoot in academic libraries what may be called an “organizational development movement” that has as its goal the creation of the “learning organization.” In my view, this is an encouraging sign that we have recognized the only way to be successful in the current environment.²

There are many strategies that are part of this movement. I have gradually come to the view that they must be tightly integrated and that organizational development should be continuous in face of change that is creating discontinuity. At the very least, this means that those of us who work in libraries must cope with the very real fact that the kind of work we do today is unlikely to be what we will be doing in the future. We must embrace the notion that part of the job is to change the job.

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What will continuous organizational development (COD) look like? While it will not take a monolithic form, it should be structural and continuous not incidental and episodic. I can suggest some key features of COD that must somehow be reflected in library programs *and* the culture; and these should include, at least, the components of teamwork, learning, leadership, measurement, and the people to execute the effort through activities, such as planning, systems design, process re-engineering, assessment, facilitation, skills training, and performance review. How this is accomplished will vary based on institutional resources and size. The challenge is to imbed these features in a COD program that is appreciated as a part of operations like any other and is accepted as part of everyone’s job. This latter condition may be the hardest to achieve, but more on that later.

The University of Maryland Libraries started out on the path toward COD as many as seven years ago; albeit, I will confess, we probably did not know it at the time. Moreover, we started by acquiring the necessary human/organizational resources and emphasizing teamwork. In time we came to realize and give equal emphasis to assuring that learning, leadership, and measurement fit into our COD program. If there is any landmark to point to, it is the appearance in June 2000 of the first in a series of working papers, “Working Paper #1 on Team Management: The Vision of a Team-Based Organization,” http://www.lib.umd.edu/PUB/team_management.html. This working paper grew out of a sense of urgency to change our organization to better meet the needs of faculty, staff, and students. It reflected elements of change that had already begun and helped galvanize our view of the general direction we were taking. It has been followed by six more such papers that demonstrate the critical feature of the continuous effort to improve our organizational performance. Thus by 2000, we had realized that this vision of COD needed to be systemic and systematic. There were a series of inter-related developments that led us to this conclusion.

The watershed events that provided us with the foundation for our COD program were the creation of a directorate for planning (1997), the formation of self-managed teams (1998), and the formation of two important positions (2000 and 2001). The directorate for planning has since incorporated other functions and is now the Division of Planning and Administrative Services, which includes the Staff Learning and Development Office (1997), <http://www.lib.umd.edu/groups/learning/stafflearning.html>.

Establishing a continuous planning capability was vital for our organizational development. With the formation of the first self-managed teams (1998) in public services, we set a firm direction. These were important first steps in populating the COD effort. Subsequently, two more positions were added to guide us in this work—assistant dean for organizational development (2000), <http://www.lib.umd.edu/groups/learning/orgdev.html>; and the coordinator of personnel programs (2001), <http://www.lib.umd.edu/groups/learning/personnelprograms.html>. These “offices” work closely together to advance the COD program and utilize the Facilitators Team (2001) as a key agent in their work, <http://www.lib.umd.edu/groups/facteam/>.

Having the committed staff resources is, of course, an enormous step in the direction of building a rigorous program, and we are at least part of the way to that goal. Together, these three programmatic areas support the libraries’ individual and organizational advancement and work closely together to provide resources and tools for library staff. The Organizational Development Office supports the efforts of the team-based learning organization through the planning and design of systems and processes, and training and facilitation for teams, units, and workgroups. The Staff Learning and Development Office provides educational programs and resources for 300+ staff in the libraries, under the umbrella of the Learning Curriculum. The Library Personnel and Budget Office (LPBO) provides human resource management programs and services to library faculty, staff, graduate assistants, and student employees. By doing so, the LPBO helps the libraries maintain a diverse population of motivated and skilled staff. These offices also collaborate with other individuals and groups in the libraries to create and implement programs/services.

The use of teams for problem solving and decision-making has become established practice. Two documents, “Working Paper #2: Advancing the Team-Based Organization”, http://www.lib.umd.edu/PUB/working_paper_2.html, and “Working Paper #6: Technical Services Division in a Team-Based Learning Organization,” http://www.lib.umd.edu/TSD/workingpaper6_ptA.html, describe how the team structure was gradually extended to most services and working units. Teamwork is supported through training. We recognize that establishing an organizational structure is no assurance that we actually do our work any differently, in spite of our commitment to becoming a team-based learning organization. As part of the continuous organizational development process the following principles emerged:

- Valuing the importance of learning and education that will lead to improved service to customers
- Assessing and improving work processes through process re-engineering
- Fostering shared decision-making and accountability among library staff
- Forming self-managing teams
- Developing shared leadership by strengthening the leadership skills of all library staff
- Changing the culture of the organization by creating and nurturing a shared vision and set of values by which all staff can live

To fulfill the goals, we have gradually implemented what would normally be viewed as a comprehensive training system—learning by another name. We have adopted Pe-



ter Senge’s definition of learning organizations, which is “organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.”³ All library staff are key participants in becoming a learning organization. This requires a commitment to the ongoing process of learning, growth, and development; and its basis is the Learning Curriculum, which was launched in May 2001 and is a comprehensive learning and education plan of over 150 content hours that focuses on individual and organizational development. This plan is available to all library staff in order to develop the skills needed to become members of teams and to improve the way we operate as an organization. The Learning Curriculum is comprised of 10 components, which in turn include a number of modules. The components of the learning plan include:

- Introduction: Development of the Organization
- Defining Customer Service
- Measurement, Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement for Planning and Decision-Making
- Development of Self, Teams, and Workgroups
- Exploring Leadership and Followership
- Individual Improvement
- Computer Skills
- Library Basic Skills
- Leadership Development
- Train-the-Trainer

Advancing leadership as a principle that applies to everyone in an organization presents serious challenges. We have made a considerable effort to develop the concept of leadership, which is comprehensively addressed in “Working Paper #7: Shared Leadership Development in the UM Libraries,” <http://www.lib.umd.edu/groups/learning/WP7.html#intro>. The idea

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of leadership is usually shaped by the view that it is associated with organizational hierarchy and that effective leaders have characteristics first described by James

McGregor Burns’ concept of the “transformational leader.” We do not gainsay the value of these ideas. On the other hand, we have emphasized that there is a time and place for all staff to exercise leadership. This is emphasized by our Learning Curriculum and in the shared-decision model we have adopted. The plain fact is that individuals, groups, or teams make decisions every day. Some decisions are very important and affect a lot of people or processes, whereas other decisions are small and affect only one or two people and a few processes. A decision-making process based on data leads to good decisions. That brings us to the last component of COD—measurement.

The Management Information Systems (MIS) office was established in (1998) to provide statistical information about the UM Libraries and our Association of Research

Libraries (ARL) peer libraries, <http://www.lib.umd.edu/STAFF/PAS/MIS/index.html>. It plays a critical role in leading our participation in national programs such as LibQual+ and SAILS. Equally important, MIS implements and provides analysis for library surveys in support of our decision-making and process improvement. As organizational development in the libraries has evolved, MIS has played a critical role in helping shape a fact-based model for decision-making. Teams and managers turn to the office for a variety of work. In 1999 a team was established to assist the office in helping extend its services to other units. The Library Assessment Review Committee (LARC) reviews and analyzes library related statistics, recommends areas of library activities needing additional assessment, and develops strategies for gathering needed data. The manager of MIS chairs LARC. More specifically, LARC is charged to do the following things:

- Define the extent of performance assessment needs based upon a review of the libraries resources, services, activities, and functions
- Determine applicable processes to be used for measurement
- Prioritize measurement activities based upon resources and mission
- Recommend an assessment program to support planning, decision-making, and budget justifications
- Recommend the development of benchmarks for evaluation
- Recommend a vehicle for periodic reassessment and planning on a schedule that meets the MIS manager's work cycle

The MIS office has been directly engaged in critical measurement work for COD—the development of our first “Organizational Culture and Diversity Assessment” (OCDA) survey in 2000, for instance. Working with the University of Maryland Industrial/Organizational Psychology Program, this survey was developed, tested, and grounded. It provided critical information for understanding the obstacles to implementation of our organizational development efforts, <http://www.lib.umd.edu/PUB/diversity.html>. It was just repeated in the spring of 2004, and the preliminary results give us a good picture of the COD progress and plenty to work on. Similarly, the Organizational Development Office has implemented the use of the Individual Team Organization (ITO) Survey and applied it for several years. The ITO instrument is intended to measure the extent to which a group understands how a team works and is able to function as a team. The periodic application of the ITO Survey has helped us assess the progress of teamwork as a central principle in our organizational work. Both the OCDA and ITO instruments provide information that other libraries may find useful in assessing organizational conditions that are vital to effective performance. Work is underway to publish results of these surveys.

The gradual emergence of a program of COD can be seen as a natural process in which we progressively identified needs and responded by supplying human resources and establishing the necessary organizational structures. In all, there are four FTE professionals engaged in this work full time and an equal number of graduate assistants out of an FTE staff of nearly 300—or about 2% of our total staff. We call on the resources of the university to assist us, as well as external resources. We also have gradually come to realize that this work will never be finished—and that is a central concept for COD. Old attitudes and resistance to change will always make progress uneven—faster in

some areas than others. Staff turnover will bring new individuals into the libraries, and they will bring different experiences that may or may not be in accord with our efforts. Acculturation is essential, but so too is a willingness to revisit what we have done and change it over time.

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There is something intrinsically unsatisfying about the idea of creating an organizational attitude of constant “self checking.” It runs the risk of conveying the notion that we just cannot get it right and that we are constantly tinkering for no purpose other than for tinkering itself. Countering this sense is a vital part of COD. The truth is that *not tinkering* constantly is a very risky way for an organization “to be”—risky because it leads to stasis

and entropy. The organization, the system, simply winds slowly down and begins to evince the signs of atrophy that mean it cannot effectively do its job. Such a state may be comfortable for a time; indeed, it may be really the normal state of human affairs. It is not a responsible way for us to work, however, and makes long-term success impossible.

Notes

1. Charles B. Lowry, “Re-Positioning Libraries: A Consideration of the Obstacles,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 3, 2 (April 2003): vii–xi.
2. Charles B. Lowry, “The More Things Change . . .” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 1, 4 (October 2001): vii.
3. Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990): 3.