



Applying the SARA(H) Model to Library Change Management

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Changes in Faculty Status at Academic Libraries

One current case is from a R1, land-grant university (Virginia Tech) where university strategic plans dictate increasing the “quality, quantity, and prominence of our scholarship” (vt.edu/global-distinction/faqs). Virginia Tech’s library faculty were surprised to be included in these publishing goals as only part of their faculty (about one third) are even on a parallel tenure-track path, not true tenure-track called “continued appointment” (VT Faculty Handbook). This culminated in August 2025 with the action of all parallel track library faculty being reclassified as teaching/research faculty instead of professional faculty. One faculty member up for promotion to associate was caught by these shifting standards, initially being denied their rank change (similar to Idaho State University over a decade ago - Shropshire et al. 2015). Another faculty member was recommended not to go up for professor the next year due changes in what research and publications would count for promotion. Since the library administration did not respond effectively per the opinion of the provost’s office, those outside the library started to set guidance related to research and promotion that would apply to library faculty. Although standards are still shifting related to promotion, communication between the library and provost’s office has improved significantly compared to last August.

Incorporating the SARA(H) model can help those in and out of leadership roles to understand the holistic impact of changes tied to employment like promotion and tenure. Those preparing for promotion in the near future may be feeling shock or surprise (S), and also perhaps anxiety, anger, alertness, or anticipation (A). Increased communication and clearly defining new requirements may help to mitigate this response. Creating formal and informal opportunities for impacted individuals to come together and to discuss and support each other during the period of change may also help support those impacted by changes. As individuals become accustomed to the change, some people may have begun to re-engage (R) with the process, participate in discussions with library leadership, and may be able to consider delaying going up for review if the changes to promotion criteria are significant. With support, library faculty on tenure-track or similar systems can feel acceptance (A) of the new system. If not, these library faculty will continue to move around the SARA(H) model as the system continues to shift. Ideally, these changes should facilitate increased campus visibility and respect for library faculty, generating hope (H) that the changes will be a long-term positive change for the library.

Library Closures and Moves

At one author's previous place of work, a small liberal arts college, the Science Center on campus was scheduled to be completely gutted and renovated. In the year-long planning process, leadership (beyond and also including library leadership) at the institution decided that the Science Library branch located in that building would close so that space could be repurposed to support STEM instruction and research in new and innovative ways. The library team tasked with managing the subsequent planning work required in closing a branch, assessing the collections, integrating some materials into a main branch, and de-accessioning other materials did experience several of the emotional states in the SARAH model, but mostly sat with feelings of acceptance and hope. Staff were not being let go and it was an interesting project to work on.

The library team working on this project communicated with faculty at major milestones and shared information regularly about the process, however the possibility of deaccessioning materials caused many STEM faculty to oscillate between feelings of shock, anger, and resistance for much of the planning process. Indeed, though it was clear in communications that faculty could identify items they wished to "save" that would either be held in the main library or in offsite storage, the feelings of sadness and anxiety over the fate of the books caused some to overlook and even ignore these communications. The STEM liaison librarian had one faculty member in tears at one point. Slowly, through calm, often one on one and small group conversations, the STEM liaison librarian was able to work with faculty to move them into reengagement, and sometimes even acceptance. Some faculty did indeed submit title lists, and the library team honored those requests. In the end, several years after the new science center opened, faculty are now in the hopeful phase: they are happy with the library collection and ecstatic about their new building with cutting edge facilities and critical student-supporting inclusive social, study, and reflection spaces.

The library team working on this project did not know about the SARAH model at the time. The authors of this paper suggest that when changes like this are occurring, having a sense of the emotional states library workers and patrons could be experiencing is quite useful for the change agents. With this understanding, communications could be planned in thoughtful ways that anticipate those (often initial) stages of shock, sadness, anger, and resistance.

The library team also had no significant training explicitly in trauma-informed approaches to working with colleagues and patrons. For institutions embarking on large library projects like branch closures, significant deaccessioning projects, etc., that involve strong feelings from patrons and staff alike, developing a culture of trauma-informed approaches could be deeply impactful. Trauma-informed processes do not magically happen after one webinar or training session (see the 250+ page Trauma-Informed Organizational Change Manual, ITTIC 2022). Still, individual and small series of professional development activities can absolutely be valuable and inspire lasting changes to codes of conduct, processes like onboarding, and overall communications strategies (Lema et al. 2025). The authors suggest that libraries that integrate trauma-informed approaches could weave in the SARAH model as well as they think about stakeholders involved in and affected by major changes like branch closures in their spaces.

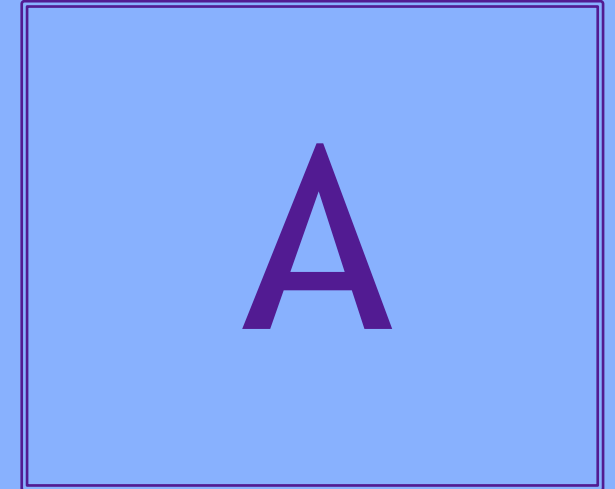
Shock / Surprise

The initial reaction to coping with negatively perceived organizational change, represented by the letter S in the SARA(H) model, is **shock** or **surprise**. This reaction is believed to happen for a number of reasons. In libraries, for example, seasoned staff often perceive some change initiatives to be a threat to their tested, established ways of working. At this stage, people are often resistant to acknowledging that a significant change is taking place. While sometimes this may manifest as outright denial, it also can take the form of believing that the change is doomed to fail and thus temporary in nature or there will be no large tangible impact from the change



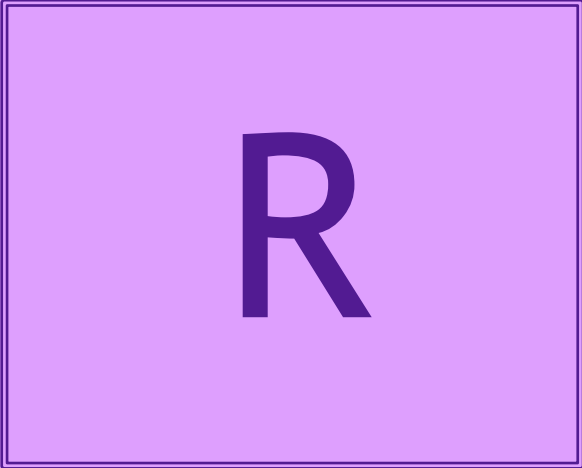
Anger, Anxiety, Alert, or Anticipation

The first A of the SARA(H) model presents two possible reactions that may happen after initial shock or surprise: a negative reaction of **anxiety** and **anger** or less negative feelings of increased **alertness** or **anticipation**. After the initial surprise or shock reaction, impacted individuals may react with anger or anxiety. These types of responses can lead to resistance to change in the workspace. Those feelings of anger or anxiety may also impact them at home. The anger may be focused on the change itself or, often, on the person communicating the change.



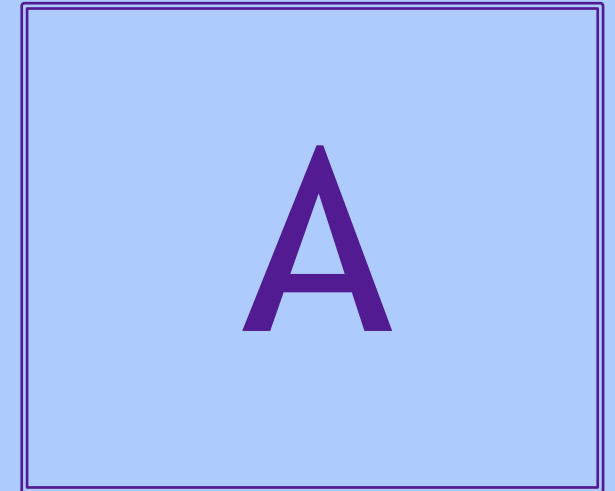
Resistance, Rejection, Re-engagement, or Rationalization

When people are in a state of **resistance** or **rejection**, while they may recognize that the change will happen no matter their feelings, they do not actively or willingly engage with the change. This can be a low point, emotionally, for the group going through change, and managing a group through this emotion can be pivotal to the success of the change process.

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Acceptance

In both the Kübler-Ross 5 Stages of Grief®, and SARA(H) models, the **acceptance** stage marks the point where denial and resistance stop, emotions settle, and integration of the change begins. Acceptance is the stage where the reality of the situation is fully acknowledged, and it has reached the stage of “it is what it is” where change can take place, and there is no more struggle against grief.



Help or Hope

In the SARA(H) model, **hope** is seen as the point where changes are confined to the past and we are looking for opportunities to get **help** and find hope. In this state people may see the positive side of change and perhaps better understand how this change might be beneficial. Hope is an important attribute of emotional intelligence and can also help minimize apathy. It is up to the individual at this stage to manage their emotions and cope with change. Some organizations may recognize the need to support this stage by offering workshops or resources to help people maintain their emotional state.



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