

Managing Change in the Hong Kong Library Environment
Anthony W. Ferguson¹
University of Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to employ four library case studies to determine how changes can be made more successfully.

Methodology/Approach: The article employs a list of five basic change management principles suggested by Team Technology to measure the effectiveness of what happened in our library.

Research limitations/implications: The principles themselves are fairly simple and are not meant to be either qualitative or quantitative research tools.

Practical implications: It would seem that if the five basic change management principles were followed, libraries would be more successful in the management of that changes they must pursue to keep vibrant and alive..

Originality/value of paper: This paper is a personal view of the four changes which were successfully implemented but which did cause angst among staff members. The value of managers paying attention to the list of change management principles is demonstrated.

Keywords: Organizational change, Library management, Change management

Article type: Case study.

A recent trip to India caused me momentarily to think that the title of my paper should perhaps be “Success through Continuity” instead of the current emphasis on managing change. I began to think that perhaps success is best achieved by figuring out what works, sticking with it, and never deviating from that. India, like the China that surrounds us here at the Chinese University, is an ancient culture, with ancient ways of doing things. In India I was talking with a good friend, a book dealer, about how to succeed in business and life. We discussed how his father had firmly believed in the power of continuity, of sticking to what works – that the job of a successful businessman was to find what works and then don’t change anything. In between conversations we went to look at ancient architectural artifacts in Delhi, Agra including the Taj Mahal, and to the fortress city of Jaipur. We ate food that was prepared in ancient ways and visited restaurants that had been in the same place for more than one hundred years. My friend is a very religious man and we spoke of his beliefs and customs, all thousands of years old. As I went through all of this I began to question the need for continuous change.

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But in retrospect, even after my India experience, I think the need for constant change is still the correct path to success. It is not that sticking to what works isn’t a good idea, it is simply that we live in a rapidly changing environment and the life span of good ideas just isn’t as long as it might have been in the past. For example, I found that the thriving restaurants in the Indian cities I visited had at least in minor ways adjusted to contemporary demands for good hygiene, lovely presentation, and good value for price. Indians love sweets and there are shops with case after case of refrigerated deserts that had been prepared employing the same recipes used by generations of cooks. Yet, the most popular establishments also had egg free ice cream and vegetarian pizza to appeal to

¹ Autobiographical note: Anthony W. Ferguson is the Librarian of the University of Hong Kong.
ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk

the changing tastes of India's young people. Likewise, while I visited old shops that are the favorites of tourists like me, they stood alongside the beautiful tall glass-walled high tech malls which India's new younger middle class want. In the end, I concluded that while there remains great respect for the ancient traditions of India, appreciation for the new modern and ever changing global culture is easy to see among India's young and older people. So let me now return to the topic of how to manage change and illustrate this discussion with comments about our experiences with change at the University of Hong Kong's libraries.

Change Management Factors

It has been said that anyone attempting to change an organization needs to recognize that change is difficult, for organizations to change successfully the people who populate them must change, and that change involves at least five factors that must be kept in mind:²

1. "Different people react differently to change." Some people like it, some don't, and others become unhappy and resistant to attempts to change them.
2. "Everyone has fundamental needs that have to be met." To some degree or another they want to be in charge of their own lives, to be included in managing the change process, and have a desire to know what is happening to them.
3. Change often involves a loss, and people go through the "loss curve." Those who make it all the way through the curve go from "shock" to "anger" to "rejection" to "acceptance" to "healing." Not everyone, though, completes all steps.
4. "Expectations need to be managed realistically." The change agent must insure that the expectations of the person(s) being changed, or the promises being made to them, need to be realistic/truthful.
5. "Fears have to be dealt with." While the person whose life is being changed might react irrationally including feeling that their whole life will be ruined, the change agent has to take such feelings seriously and work to allay their fears honestly.

What I will do now is to talk about four changes that have taken place in my own library in as many years; I will analyze the degree to which my library sufficiently considered these five factors when undertaking our changes, and identify, with the benefit of hindsight, what we might have done differently to have been more successful. It is important at this point to make it very clear that what follows represents my own personal point of view. The changes described in this paper were experienced by dozens of dedicated staff members, all of whom could and probably would have different explanations of what and why the actions described in my paper happened. Perhaps a more fair approach would be to have all of these voices, points of view, represented; but my purpose is to give you a fairly intimate account from my position as the University Librarian of what I thought was happening and why some of the things we did worked well and why some did not. I believe this sort of self analysis is necessary if we are to become a learning organization: "An organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future."³

² Team Technology. "Change management: five basic principles and how to apply them. Available <http://www.teamtechnology.co.uk/changemanagement.html>

³ Senge, Peter M. (1994), *The fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Currency Doubleday, pg. 14.

Changes Undertaken

First let's begin by describing the four changes we undertook to avoid extinction, to avoid becoming organizational dinosaurs:

1. Faced with reduced funding, we decided to combine Chinese and Western technical services units. The goal was to emerge with a strong and robust single unit instead of slowly starving both units for resources. This might sound simple enough but the Chinese unit had long been recognized for its excellence and many members of its staff, past and present, were reluctant to change the way things were done.
2. Attendant to this change was the decision to also change classification systems for Chinese and other Asian language materials from an old system, which at the time had not been updated for many years and which required a significant amount of original cataloguing work, to the Library of Congress system.
3. We decided to employ full time collection developers for several of our faculties instead of a decentralized system in which almost all professional librarians, and even a few non-professionals, each shared the responsibilities of working with the dozens of departments throughout the University.
4. We decided to turn the direction of the staff development program over to the staff themselves and at the same time create a staff association designed to get them to identify what issues concerned them most and to work with management to resolve these issues.

Now let's look at each of these four changes in terms of the five change factors which has been suggested must be handled/understood if change is to be successfully implemented.

Different People React Differently To Change

This was certainly the case in terms of our decision to consolidate the two units, one for Chinese materials and the other for Western materials. We had some staff members who were excited about the opportunities for their own personal growth in this change; we had staff whose reputations and self-worth was tied to the former system; and we had some staff who feared that their jobs were going to be made redundant and that they would be dismissed, and possibly even that their own personal survival and the survival of those who relied upon them was in peril.

The decision to switch classification systems had similar divisions: we had several cataloguers and shelvees who "spoke an old language of how to classify things" that was to be made extinct; we had staff who had higher status in the previous smaller organization than they would in the larger group; and we had newer staff who probably wondered what all the fuss was about and indeed temporary staff members for whom the change represented new jobs and new opportunities for continued employment.

The decision to employ full time collection developers meant that the whole nature of the collection development enterprise was to change. For the head of collection development, instead of coordinating the efforts of scores of staff members who reported elsewhere, she was now to directly supervise the activities of just a few fellow professionals. For the new collection developers, the whole nature of their work was to change. Since they were mostly fairly senior staff, many of whom had previously supervised larger than the new one in which they now found themselves working but not as the supervisor, it was

easy for them to feel a bit uncomfortable in their new roles. For junior librarians, on the other hand, joining the collection development unit presented a chance to get a more responsible job than they had before.

It seemed to me that the advent of staff-directed development and the creation of their own organization also produced different reactions from different groups of people. Some staff members wanted to be directed by management in terms of their personal and career development, but others did not. Those who wanted to have a say in how their careers would develop were receptive to the changes that were proposed and wanted to take part in the staff development activities. The supervisors of these staff members also reacted differently. Some were quite willing to let their staff have time away from their duties to take part in these activities, while others were very reluctant to let them have released time to take part.

Everyone Has Fundamental Needs, Including Fears about the Future That Need To Be Addressed

In the case of the consolidation of the Chinese and Western technical services, the switch between classification systems, the development of the new collection development team, and the handing of the staff development program over to the staff themselves, meetings were held to try to involve the staff in thinking through what was happening in the Libraries, to inform them what and why these changes were needed. But in retrospect, I perceive that our efforts lacked sufficient coordination and too many of our staff were in so much denial that they didn't avail themselves of the opportunity to take part in the change process. Moreover, since the decision had already been made by management, the staff members being changed were insufficiently involved in the change process and so they couldn't feel that they were in charge of their own lives.

In the case of the decision to switch classification systems, while professional librarians had been directly involved in the decision making process, I think many lower level staff felt that they were only informed of the changes after the fact. Consequently, while some could feel that they had been meaningfully involved in the change process and they were informed about what was happening, but others could not share these same feelings.

The cases of switching from part time to full time collection developers and to turn the professional development program over to the staff were two more instances in which because top management made the decisions, the fundamental needs of the staff to understand what was happening to them, to feel that they had a say in these decisions, and to understand why the changes were needed were not met. While top management understood the situation and the expected outcomes, the staff did not and was understandably worried.

While I still feel good that my colleagues and I made these strategic decisions, on the basis of this change management analysis, I can understand why the morale of our organization suffered from time to time: we didn't take sufficiently rich steps to insure that staff members felt they could participate in the decision making process. Consequently, some if not most of our staff members felt that management was not (or at least that I was not) being sufficiently open with them, wasn't giving them sufficient information about what was happening to them, and as a consequence quite a few developed unneeded fears about their future. While formal communication might have

been insufficient, the informal grapevine thrived and much of its content seems to have been fearful and negative. I think it is fairly easy to see that the changes to try to create a robust collection development team and to turn staff development over to the staff, indeed all four decisions, were changes done for and to the staff, but not with the staff.

Recently, I heard a very profound but simple suggestion from a change consultant brought in by our University, which is also implementing great changes in the lives of its staff members. He said managers should simply walk around and ask staff “why are you doing this or that?” Unless they can tie what they are doing to the larger picture, the picture that will elevate their actions from the routine to seeing them as integral components needed for the achievement of the organization’s success, the manager should take advantage of that moment to help the staff member understand the importance of their work. Such understandings can go a long way toward meeting the basic needs of staff members. Of course while walking around management may also discover tasks being completed which are no longer as important as they once were and should be discontinued.

People Go Through a Loss Curve

In all four areas of change, as managers we tried to resolve staff feelings and fears about the loss of jobs and status by assigning them new positions, by giving them new titles and job descriptions. Where all of these actions took place and the staff involved accepted the new roles, feelings of loss were replaced by feelings of gain. But these feelings were not universal by any means. Fortunately, I believe, in the case of some collection developers who felt uncomfortable in their new positions, this problem was eased when additional supervisory responsibilities were later added to their portfolios, giving them the accoutrements of power and importance normally associated with their status in the organization.

Instilling confidence was the tactic followed to combat feelings of loss among the support staff that were to switch from doing X on Friday and begin doing Y on Monday. For the staff needing to catalogue in a new system, and the technical services staff who had to adopt a new work flow, management took steps to help them feel more confident of success, we brought in consultants to provide more training in the new work they were to do. One consultant suggested that a cataloguing competency test be used to measure the degree to which they were capable of working independently. A side effect was that those who passed the test were able to take pride in their new abilities. This eased their fears about failing. It must be noted, however, that the use of consultants also introduced additional new changes which then generated a whole new cycle of fears about the future.

As for staff development, a committee was established and a staff development officer was appointed on a part-time basis to take charge of the programs that evolved. Together the committee and the officer became the change agents who sought to educate the other members of the staff about the value of taking part. Gradually more and more staff and their supervisors participated. As evidence of increased productivity, enhanced levels of service, and the advancement of staff members who took part began to take place, support for these programs and the positive affect it could have upon the careers of those who took part in them grew.

In the end, time seemed to be needed to allow everyone to adjust, to make it through the process of getting comfortable with the new ways of doing things. Most now seem to be comfortable with the changes. In technical services, the changes seem to be vindicated when the staff was recognized this year for contributing more original cataloguing records to OCLC than any other library in the world. This demonstrated that while they had lost much, they had gained even more.

Effective Management of Expectations

To counteract fears about the future, managers undertaking changes also need to persuade their staff members through realistic projections about the benefits that will be achieved through the changes being instituted. I have tried to look back to uncover what we did to accomplish this need and have discovered two problems in the way things were handled. First, I believe that we wrongly assumed that the benefits that would accrue to our staff, as a result of all these changes, would be immediately self evident to them, but they were not. They did not immediately realize that full time collection developers would develop better collections; that a stronger single cataloguing unit would be more productive; that the use of the Library of Congress cataloguing system would result in more copy cataloguing; and that if the staff were in charge of their own development would be more productive. Second, as this list ably illustrates, all of these benefits, were designed to meet the needs of management and perhaps with the exception of the self-directed staff development program, did not focus on the needs of the staff.

We could have provided information about how the collection developers might have expected to be more valued as colleagues by the faculty as they helped mold the collections to fit their learning, teaching and research needs, but we didn't. We could have helped them understand how these new sets of experiences would prepare them for future advancement, but we didn't spend much time on this and it took more time than expected for them to discover it on their own. And we could have provided information about how each set of employees would personally benefit from taking part in the changes being implemented, but it seems that we expected everyone to figure it out for themselves.

Conclusion

At this point I would like to pose and answer three questions: Is there value to looking at these five change management factors? In our case did we show sufficient appreciation for these factors while making our changes? What might we have done differently?

Based upon our own experience, I think dealing with each of the factors just discussed is an excellent idea. Had we put more effort into dealing with each factor during the four years we were making all of these changes, we would have avoided many of the problems that we did encounter, e.g., our "morale problem." However, had we been more conscious of these factors, would we have made the changes? Without doubt the changes would have been made much slower and possibly some might have been put off for several years. Clearly managers have to make a decision about how fast they are going to make changes. If they sufficiently fail to take into account the change management factors discussed here, they risk the successful achievement of their objectives.

While I am not ready to say that we totally failed to show sufficient appreciation for each factor, it is very easy to admit that we could have done much better. Before coming to the University of Hong Kong, I was at Columbia University. For about 10 of the 16 years I was there, our main library, in which my office was located, was under renovation. The decision had been made that rather than close the library for the three or so years that it would have taken to complete the renovation, it was decided that we would renovate a single floor, or even half of a floor, at a time and then move the collections and activities happening in another part of the building into the renovated area. The renovation process would then move onto another part of the building. You can imagine the chaos that we had to deal with year after year. Yet, one of the tactics employed to make this process a success was to produce a monthly newsletter that basically did four things: it told everyone affected what work was being done; it reminded us why it was being done; it helped mold the set of positive expectations that we all had about how nice it would be in the future, and; it placed what was happening in the context of the overall process of improving the conditions in which we and our patrons would work.

In essence, the newsletter gave us information on what was happening to us (fulfilling one of the basic needs that we all have); it helped clarify what could be expected in the near and more distant future (helped us develop a positive set of expectations); it gave us a feeling that while we had to endure many inconveniences, a better day was coming (helped us deal with the difficulties of the loss curve); and it helped us avoid thinking that this process would never end (fought off the development of any irrational fears, e.g., since we wouldn't be able to get our work done, our performance evaluations would be terrible and we would lose our jobs).

In retrospect, had I known more about these change management factors at the beginning of deciding to institute our four changes, I would have suggested that we develop a newsletter or perhaps a series of frequent meetings with all the staff to address each factor in a better fashion. We did some of the work needed, but clearly not enough.

Yet, libraries like ours are always in the process of changing and so while we could have done a better job in the past, as an organization we can learn from our mistakes and do a better job of what needs to be done today and in the future.