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PEOPLE MANAGEMENT – BE BOLD!

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ABSTRACT

Article Type

Viewpoint, general review.

Purpose/value

Encourages managers in the rapidly changing library and information services environment to be bold in people management. Outlines four aspects of people management where it is particularly important to be bold: staff selection and recruitment; training development and workplace learning; performance management, and; organisational change. Provides pointers to good management practice in these areas.

Keywords

People management; organisational change; staff selection and recruitment; performance management, human resource development.

The proposition forming the core of this conference is that the continuing relevance and value to our clients of library and information services lies chiefly with people – those who are responsible for offering our services. This is a bold proposition – but one that will resonate with all who come to this conference.

This paper addresses that core premise – recognising that the future success of any library and information service *is* deeply connected to the effectiveness of the work done by the people who have a primary role in providing those services. Academic libraries face major challenges and opportunities which arise from the radical changes now occurring in the ways in which information is organised and accessed. These challenges call for bold management of the key resource in any successful library and information services organisation – people.

Through bold people management we have a chance to fly like the phoenix. Without bold people management our organisations risk the fate that befell the dinosaurs.

THE PACE OF CHANGE IN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES

Anyone reading the literature of libraries and information management or attending a current conference or professional seminar in the field will be aware of discussion of the accelerating pace of change in our profession. Disruptive technologies are changing our societies and our library services in significant ways. The clients who use our products and services use them differently to the way they were used ten, five or even one or two years ago. Some, possibly many, of our clients – current or potential – may just decide to go elsewhere for their information needs (Shih & Allen, 2007). Libraries and librarians must keep up with the changing environment in order to remain relevant.

Speaking at the start of the current millennium, futurist Wendy Shultz, opening the American Library Association Second Congress on Professional Education (ALA, 2001), pointed to a number of societal factors which are impacting on our profession. She noted, *inter alia*:

- a general acceleration in the pace of change;
- the ubiquity of technological innovation;
- expanding educational formats and opportunities;
- changing workplace structures and ethics;
- altered worker demands; and
- changes in customer expectations and lifestyles.

Speaking more recently, Australian and now Hong Kong based librarian Steve O'Connor pointed to many of those same factors and challenged us – library and information professionals and service providers – to perform better than we have in the past. In his provocative key-note address at the recent *Shanghai International Library Forum* O'Connor (2007) argued that at least some librarians and library groups have too great a tendency to focus on the ordinary and the mundane. This is at the very same time that changes impacting on our profession are accelerating at great speed. Instead O'Connor exhorts us to be global in our outlook, to be more flexible than we have been in the past, to be confident in the face of uncertainty, to keep open minds and to think heretical thoughts.

For all of us who work in library and information services, Shultz and O'Connor's observations should resonate clearly. The environment in which we operate and offer services is changing and it is changing fast. The challenge is to either keep up with change or be left behind. In order to face, and deal with, that challenge a bold and confident approach to managing the people resources of our organisations is required. It is people who are the key to our future – flying or dieing, phoenix or dinosaur.

BEING BOLD

What might being bold in people management mean? As library and information services professionals we do not always have a reputation as being particularly bold! Rather the contrary – witness the Nancy Pearl “Action Doll” figure - a librarian with a “patented shushing action” (Broom, 2003). The creators of this doll have deliberately played up the notion of librarians as people, most probably with hair buns and spectacles, who spend their time telling people to be quiet! It *is* an exaggerated stereotype. However, it may be that the majority of those who work in library and information services do sit more comfortably at the end of the personality spectrum which values order and structure. Perhaps we do not tend enough towards boldness?

An often cited example of bold management and leadership comes from right outside the library and information services sector. Jack Welch – sometime CEO of the General Electric Corporation (GE) famously blew up a GE plastics factory (by accident) early in his career. He survived the explosion – literally and organisationally – and went on to apply his bold approach to management and leadership as he rose to become CEO of that same organisation. Welch focused on people and culture. He saw the need for a bold approach to changing the organisational culture at GE. He drove through very tough measures to achieve his aims and he attracted both criticism and praise for doing so. Jack Welch’s degree of boldness arguably suited GE (that is certainly what Welch (2001) argues!). Boldness does not though have to be as far along the spectrum as Welch took it. Boldness will mean different things for different organisations and the degree of boldness appropriate and necessary to shake up GE at Welch’s hands is probably beyond what any of our organisations need – although at times maybe not? Steve O’Connor’s invocation to managers to listen well, to keep open minds, to be open to that which they may not know or understand, and to think heretical thoughts is essentially about being bold. Being bold does not, should not, mean being reckless. What is important is that organisations, their managers and their leaders are bold in whatever way fits the circumstances and needs of their organisation and the times that they are in.

If bold people management is important where and how should we, as managers and leaders, be bold? Four aspects are particularly important:

- Bold management of selection and recruitment of staff;
- Bold management of performance;
- Bold management of training development and workplace learning;
- Bold management of organisational change.

MANAGING THE SELECTION AND RECRUITMENT OF STAFF – BE BOLD!

People are the key resource in any organisation. Quality services, innovative and critical thinking, effective working all come in significant part out of the combined effort of an

organisation's human resources, not from technology, processes, or financial structures. Selecting and recruiting people is therefore one of the most crucial activities in building and sustaining an effective organisation. That proposition may seem to state the blatantly obvious. However, it is remarkable to observe the extent to which many organisations and managers pay insufficient attention to this critical process.

An organisation that is struggling may be transformed by key selection and recruitment action and good selection and recruitment may make a good organisation even better. Done well this is a key component in equipping an organisation for success. Done badly it can leave a legacy of problems that can take extensive time and effort to resolve. Indeed, it has been postulated that an organisation with a 20% rate of staff turnover per year and which has recruitment and selection practices which hire mediocre employees, could theoretically become fully mediocre within 5 years! (Sullivan, 1997)

How then can we as managers be bold in approaching this key task? Here are ten tips for bold and effective selection and recruitment:

1. Think and look outside the methods and approaches that have been habitually used to select and recruit people. Don't discard tried and tested methods just for the sake of innovation but be prepared to look at new approaches and new ideas.
2. Take time and be careful in identifying what is required in any role under consideration and what is sought in a person who can successfully take on that role. Describe roles carefully and thoroughly (while getting the balance right between broad description of the role and a useful amount of detail). Think thoroughly about what qualifications, skills, abilities and attributes are required to successfully carry out the role and describe these clearly. Clear role analysis and description will pay off in attracting candidates who are a good fit for the role and enabling those responsible for selection and recruitment to determine the best candidate.
3. Search widely for potential employees and move outside traditional boundaries. Advertise vacancies in newspapers and electronic listings of job vacancies but also tap into professional networks – formal and informal - to publicise vacancies and to seek potential employees.
4. Consider alternatives to standard modes of employment – for example consider offering opportunities for people to take on a role on a temporary secondment from their ongoing employment. Doing so provides the opportunity for a try-out by both parties. That may lead to either a longer term appointment or a decision that there is not a good role fit between role and employee. Better to find that in a short term appointment which is reversible for both parties than to lock into an appointment which does not work and which may require protracted time, considerable cost and significant personal stress for all involved to undo.

5. Think carefully about who will make the selection decisions. Consider the key perspectives that are required to assess applicants and look for selection panel members who can represent (preferably several) of those perspectives. Consider taking a 360 degree view of the role in selection. For example, if the role to be filled is a manager of client services a selection panel might usefully include, *inter alia*:
 - managers to whom the position will report;
 - staff from the group to be managed;
 - peer group managers, and;
 - clients from the group to be served.
6. Look for multiple perspectives on candidates. These may include:
 - written applications and responses to the selection criteria;
 - interviewing (possibly multiple interviews);
 - candidates presenting talks on a topic relevant to the role;
 - response (verbal or written) to scenarios, psychological testing;
 - comment on the candidate by referees and others who have knowledge of their work, skills and abilities.
7. Bring in selection and recruitment expertise. The majority of managers undertake selection and recruitment work only intermittently. They are thus less likely to have available all of the skills required to make good selection decisions. Including an experienced HR professional in all stages of the selection and recruitment process ensures that relevant recruitment skills and knowledge are present. .
8. Ensure a balance between subjectivity and objectivity in the selection process. Selecting people for jobs does require subjective decisions. However, subjective judgements will be better informed and safer if they are based in objective and structured frameworks using appropriate types and amounts of information on the candidate from a range of perspectives.
9. Recognise and accept that sometimes – despite following all of the prescriptions above – mistakes will be made. Selection is, at base, all about people and thus is prone to the vagaries of human nature. When mistakes happen learn from them so they may be avoided in the future.
10. Above all – take sufficient time and be thorough in all aspects of the process! Do not cut corners or be tempted to rush through any stage. You and your organisation will suffer the consequence of hasty and/or poorly handled recruitment. Mistakes made in haste can be costly and time consuming to resolve.

MANAGING PERFORMANCE – BE BOLD!

Managing the performance of the people in an organisation is a critical part of effective people management. Performance management as an opportunity to:

- agree on and set realistic performance objectives and standards
- consider training and development needs;

- address any support and infrastructure needs which impact on work performance;
- discuss work and the workplace generally and consider issues which may impact on an employee's capacity to do their work well;
- measure and discuss achievement and performance against objectives;
- recognise and acknowledge superior performance;
- identifying and honestly focus on areas where performance goals are not being achieved;
- act to address under-performance where that is evident.

However, it is an area which is too often either avoided all together or at best not done adequately.

Here are some tips for bold and effective performance management:

1. Take performance management seriously. Don't see it, or let it be seen by either employees and /or managers, as a bureaucratic task of little or no value.
2. Strive to keep the right balance in the processes of performance management, keeping it as simple, clear and jargon free as possible – while not reducing it to an overly simplistic exercise. Spend sufficient time on performance management. To be done properly performance management requires both participants – manager and employee – to reflect, comment on, and discuss performance. That takes, and should be afforded, time. However, performance management should not be allowed to consume excessive time, nor to become an overly bureaucratic process. Doing so is a sure way to kill off enthusiasm for participation in the process!
3. Ensure performance management operates as a two-way process. Good performance management should not just be a manager telling an employee what to do, how to do it, and how well the employee has been judged to have performed. Good performance management should be interactive, a two-way discussion between manager and employee.
4. Train managers and employees in the why and how of performance management. The reason for undertaking performance management and how it is done well may not be immediately apparent to all. Spend time on informing employees why performance management is undertaken and its importance. Train managers in effective performance management – in particular how to handle difficult cases of seriously poor performance – and where to go for help when it is needed.
5. Think “outside the box”. Consider how best to examine and assess performance. Look for multiple perspectives – for example using 360 degree feedback appraisal methods. Keep looking for ways to improve performance management and be prepared to change processes when necessary. Both managers and employees

should ask: is there anything we could and should do differently as part of performance management?

6. Recognise, acknowledge and reward (if possible) exceptional performance. Reward may be monetary (accelerated salary progression, bonus payment), a special recognition award or access to support to attend a conference or other activity that is of special interest but which might not otherwise be supported. The recognition is what is important.
7. Recognise and call to account poor performance. If an employee's performance is below standard they should be clearly told what is expected and how they are failing to meet that standard. They must be given an opportunity to respond and to improve their performance. If they cannot or will not improve they need to be made aware of the consequences – which ultimately may involve termination of employment.
8. Be open, honest, ethical and fair in managing performance. Be clear about what is expected and be clear in saying when the standard has or has not been reached. Be consistent and follow through. Ensure that whatever is said will be done is done – be it arranging training and development, taking action to recognise exceptional performance, or taking action to deal with below-standard performance etc.
9. Call in expertise when required. As much as performance management is (or should be) part of any manager's role they may not be expert in the task – especially when dealing with difficult cases. Giving employees honest feedback on their performance, especially when that performance is below standard can be one of the toughest jobs a manager can do. HR managers are (or should be) expert in performance management. They can offer advice, expertise and where necessary direct intervention and involvement, in dealing with performance management matters. HR managers will be aware of legal and procedural frameworks which ensure proper and fair processes and of sanctions (such as withholding salary increments, downgrading of classification and at the extreme – termination of employment) which may be applied if necessary. It is important to ensure that any person who is subject to action to deal with unsatisfactory performance is accorded natural justice and that any performance management process will withstand scrutiny in a court or tribunal should such scrutiny arise.
10. Deal with the hard cases first. Although this may seem counter intuitive it is important and productive to attend to, and hopefully resolve, the hard cases up front. By dealing with performance which is seriously below standard, and/or where an employee is resistant to participating in performance management, managers can develop confidence in dealing with performance issues. Dealing with manifest underperformance sends the message to others that performance management is a serious business and that underperformance *will* be called to account.

MANAGING TRAINING, DEVELOPMENT AND WORKPLACE LEARNING – BE BOLD!

Human resource development (HRD) is concerned with developing the work-related capacity of people – as individuals, in teams, and at whole-of-organisation level. HRD is an important part of providing people with the knowledge, understanding, skills, and training that enables them to perform effectively. The degree and pace of change in the library and information services sector makes HRD a strategic imperative

Here are some tips for bold management of human resource development – some strategic, some practical:

1. Recognise the strategic priority of HRD and make it an ongoing process of developing knowledge, skills, and capability in individuals, teams and whole organisations.
2. Recognise that development and learning may mean different things for different people at different stages of their career. Think broadly about developing work-related capacity of people and teams. Look for people and teams who are ready for development and work with them to find out, and meet if possible, current and future development needs.
3. Look outside the box and push boundaries where necessary. Be prepared to push some boundaries through training and development programs. For example some people will find such things as personality and/or working style assessments to be challenging. However, they can produce powerful learning both for individuals and for teams. Push boundaries enough to get a useful degree of unsettlement and learning but avoid pushing too far. Pushing too far or too fast may risk resistance and disillusionment. Get the balance right. Be bold but don't be reckless.
4. Involve people from within the organisation to train others. This can be valuable on many levels, including:
 - recognising and tapping into knowledge;
 - developing and expanding the individual concerned;
 - demonstrating to other staff the knowledge and capability within the organisation;
 - demonstrating willingness to encourage people and to utilise extant organisational information knowledge and skills.
5. Involve people from within the organisation in identifying HRD needs and developing and implementing programs to implement those needs. This taps into knowledge of training and development need at grass roots levels and can assist in directing activities to meet those needs. Such involvement can also, in itself, form a powerful developmental exercise for the individuals concerned.
6. Bring in outside expertise when it is needed. Just as it is important to recognise and use capability extant within an organisation it is also important to look outside the organisation when appropriate and necessary. Sometimes an outsider – consultant,

facilitator, training provider – is needed in order to get clear perspectives and to convey clarity and boldness of message.

7. Think about teaming with other like organisations to jointly run HRD activities. This can spread the cost of HRD (an important factor if budgets are tight) but more importantly it offers the opportunity to expose people in the two (or more) organisations involved to others and through them ideas, the organisational dynamics of other groups and different approaches to dealing with issues challenges etc.
8. Evaluate learning and organisational human resource development. Assess and measure the success of HRD programs. Don't just assume that what is being done is working. If the HRD program is working well the organisation needs to know that in order to build on that which is working. If it isn't working the organisation needs to know that to, and must be prepared to act to refocus HRD efforts in more productive ways. There are many ways of approaching evaluation of HRD – from simple to complex – so do it.
9. Strive to build a learning organisation. Stated simply, a learning organisation is likely to exhibit some or all of these characteristics (Rowden, 2001):
 - providing continuous learning opportunities;
 - using learning – individual and organisation wide - to achieve organisational goals;
 - linking individual performance with overall organisational performance
 - fostering inquiry and dialogue;
 - embracing creative tension as a source of energy and renewal;
 - encouraging people to take risks (and recognising that sometimes things fail);
 - encouraging and facilitating the open sharing of experience;
 - ensuring an active awareness of, and interaction with, the environment, (both internal and external), in which the organisation operates.

Such a culture of organisational learning can play a key role in ensuring ongoing effectiveness and value of human resource development activities.

MANAGING ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE – BE BOLD!

Achieving change in our organisations is critical given the pace and nature of the change in the external environment in which we operate. Successfully managing change is very largely about managing the people side of change.

In order to be bold and effective change managers need to:

1. Ensure change readiness. If organisational change is to succeed and take hold there must be readiness for change – at both individual and whole-of-organisation level. Creating change readiness entails building individual and, thence, organisation-wide momentum, excitement and commitment to change, and a sense of need and urgency for change.

2. Plan for change. Organisational change is a complex and long-term task. Planning is critical to success. A change management plan can be an important tool for mapping how the organisation is to move from its current state to a desired future state. A plan can link together disparate parts of a change process, establishing priorities, timelines, responsibilities and mechanisms for review and (where necessary) revision, and can also play a major role in communicating about change.
3. Lead change. Effective change requires good and sustained leadership. Commitment, vision and direction from the top of the organisation is critical, as is clear articulation of vision goals, timelines, expected achievements and review points. Change messages must be realistic and genuine. Real organisational change is not something that can be simply imposed. The best chance for change to persist and to be truly effective is where changes are achieved through a partnership between those who lead the organisation at a senior level and those who are close to the everyday practical work of the organisation.
4. Manage and support change. Clear management focus is important in ensuring that change objectives, and progress towards them, are kept at the forefront of the organisational agenda – both literally and metaphorically. Change managers must watch for and counter change stalling. Stalling may arise from both organisational inertia and/or active blocking of change by those who stand to lose from, and/or are simply opposed to the changes.
5. Communicate effectively about change. Communication is critical in achieving successful and persisting change. Employees are more likely to commit to change when they have full and clear information about the nature of changes, the reasons for change, what has been achieved, and what is still to be done. Conversely, people are more likely to resist change when clear and honest communication is absent. Recognise that organisations vary and communicate accordingly. Use a variety of communication methods including, depending on the intended audience. Listen – don't just talk. Demonstrate commitment to genuine and open communication at all levels of management and involve all managers in the process of communicating about change. Avoid jargon and hype. Above all, take sufficient time to communicate. Successful organisational change takes time. So too does communication about change.
6. Recognise and respond to change resistance. Change resistance is natural and an expected part of any organisational change. Understanding why and how opposition to change occurs, and developing the ability to respond effectively, is crucial to the success or failure of change efforts. The key to effectively managing change resistance is clear understanding of the nature of, and reasons for, the resistance. A contextually sensitive response – engaging with resistance, taking it seriously and listening in order to assess the validity of the resistance – has the potential to turn

- resistance and opposition into support for change. In other cases authority and power may need to be used in order to overcome hard-core resistance to change.
7. Persist, follow through, evaluate and learn. Achieving sustained organisational change is a long range task. The process of change does not stop when the most visible parts of a change program have been completed. Many failed change efforts fail at precisely that point – changes being overturned by either organisational inertia, a desire by some to return to old ways, or a combination of both factors. For change to really take root the impact and outcomes of change must be honestly evaluated. Questions to be asked include: have the expected benefits been achieved?; what can be learned from how the change was handled?; what might have been done better?; what remains to be done?
 8. Recognise that people are the key factor. Change happens only when people make it happen. Other than in exceptional circumstances, change cannot simply be imposed. Attending to, and handling well, the human factor in any change process can be the key to success. Conversely, poor handling of the people element may be the biggest hurdle to achieving change and may exacerbate all of the other common causes of change failure.

CONCLUSION

The times of change in which we all work require us – those responsible for managing and leading library and information service organisations – to be bold. Being bold does not mean being reckless. It does mean moving well way from the stereotype of the Nancy Pearl action figure doll with the “amazing push button shushing action”. It requires, at times and in proper quantity, bold thinking and bold action.

If we practice bold people management our organisations and services *can* continue to fly. If not we risk change overtaking us. Relegation to dinosaur status – or perhaps just being remembered as the action doll figure with the patented shushing action –neither option is attractive. So, in people management be bold and be successful!

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Further readings:

The author is a regular contributor to the *Library Management* journal - writing on the topic of human resource development and organisational change management. The examples of these articles cited below provide concise overviews of some of the topics under discussion in this paper and pointers to further readings.

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