



Reframing Organizations through Communication and Advocacy

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on organizational development which is essential in today's climate to help libraries become more flexible in today's quickly changing environment. Libraries must be poised to meet today's challenges and those of the future. Librarians must draw on their strong heritage to help organizations become more engaged with their communities through strong communication that will influence their local politics whether it is their university, city, town, or province. In order to achieve this objective, librarians must start with internal communication that transforms librarians and staff into positive advocates for the library. Librarians must also develop techniques that promote libraries to their communities with positive and engaging messages that build support for libraries.

Introduction

Focusing on organizational development is essential in today's climate to facilitate libraries to be more flexible in today's quickly changing environment. Libraries must be poised to meet today's challenges and those of the future and librarians should draw on their strong heritage to help organizations become more engaged with their communities through strong communication that will influence their local politics whether it is their university, city, town, or province. In order to achieve this objective, librarians must start with internal communications to transform librarians and staff into positive advocates for the library. Librarians must also develop techniques that promote libraries to their communities with positive and engaging messages that ultimately build support for libraries.

Language is a critical tool in reframing organizations. "Work settings are language communities in that structure, boundaries, norms and culture are organized linguistically."¹ Library directors in reality are leading language communities with its

own patterns and codes and an effective leader understands and speaks this language. This paper will examine the research of Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey on how language can be utilized to effect real change in individuals and organizations. Language will also be examined as a tool for librarians to help build their advocacy skills so that by using language effectively, librarians can advocate for libraries within their communities.

Leadership and Language

The library community needs strong leadership to help revision the library organization and help it become a vital member of its community. While it seems simple to suggest that for an organization to move forward, it typically needs to change, however, change is difficult and it is not unusual that organizations will make little changes only to revert to its former self resulting in an organization that is unable to advocate for itself. This should not be surprising since organizations are made up of people and people tend to resist change. As the cliché states, it is human nature. So how can people and organizations really change to meet the challenges they are facing?

Language can be the tool that effects real change in people and organizations. Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey in their research state that language forms are tools for transforming customary patterns into action.² Their model includes seven languages to be used for true transformational change including internal languages that teach us how we can approach change and transformation within our personal lives. The languages also explore how organizational language moves an organization beyond the status quo to one that is reflective and helps leaders to develop strategies so that the organization becomes more engaged with the current environment. By envisioning situations with different perspectives and encouraging librarians to recast the way they view situations, librarians can then explore models of communication within our organizations. Examining organizational communication will help librarians to develop language communities that facilitate transformative organizations that are responsive to the community's needs. This first step of examining organizational communication is essential to developing external communication strategies. By developing strong internal language, organizations not only effectively communicate internally but they develop consistent messages that are communicated externally to the larger community. As librarians and library staff develop these communication techniques they also develop new ways to advocate for their libraries.

Internal Languages

Are there changes you wish to make in your organization or life but they have not occurred? What holds us back from real changes in our organizations? This is a critical question that most leaders ask in their position especially as libraries must adapt to a changing information environment. Language plays a vital role in understanding how we can work through the process of transformational change in both our personal and work lives. Language is a tool – not just for communication but how we speak to ourselves. Internal language is a predictor for how we act so to change; we need to change the language running around our brains. And this takes

training and practice so that we have new conversations within ourselves and our organizations.

Language of Complaint to Language of Commitment

The first step in the process of changing our organizations is to analyze complaints. Complaints are valid forms of communication and they provide insights into organizations. We suggest that you track complaints and be open to listening to the complaints in your organization. Do not make any judgments regarding the complaints as you listen to the language of your colleagues. There is no need to react at this time to the complaints but we urge you to be aware of them. More importantly we are not suggesting that you eliminate the complaints, whining, griping, and hoping but as you observe, note that the complaints do not go anywhere. Complaints do not move an organization forward and the reality is that complaints do not accomplish very much.

This exercise can be conducted individually or as a group and the appendix contains a communication toolbox that will assist you in walking through the process. As a group or as individuals it is productive to analyze organizational complaints. Gather the complaints together and you might notice a pattern or theme. Or pick out one or two complaints to consider. As you analyze the complaints, can you reframe the complaints so that they are actually productive and could change how your organization works? Each complaint contains information regarding a person's passion. Complaints offer insights into the values of the individual or organization, for instance, staff may complain about the lack of book trucks or that there is never a book truck when you need one. In analyzing the complaint, staff may want to quickly shelve books so that patrons can quickly access items in the stacks thereby providing good service and making the patrons happy. Or staff may complain that they are never included in budget decisions and upon examination, they don't want to make the difficult decisions but they value involvement in the organizational process of determining priorities. If we examine the complaint, we may find an underlying commitment and instead of reacting or responding to the complaint, we should explore the complaint further to discover the commitment. Examining commitments allows an organization to move forward in making transformational change.

Language of Blame to Language of Personal Responsibility

As an organization, look at the commitment and consider what is keeping your commitment from being more fully realized? Kegan and Lahey suggest that taking responsibility goes beyond assigning blame and asks us to remember that we are complex humans. We need to look deeper at the source of our behavior and unless we examine the source, our behaviors will never change. So what is your organization doing that is holding you back from your commitment? It might be that your organization is busy working on projects that are not directed towards the most important priority. It might be that your organization is not directing funds toward areas that are important for your patrons. Or perhaps it is cultural and individuals in your organization are not working toward the commitment because they don't understand it or don't share the commitment. Whatever the action or inaction is, it is

important to examine the commitment and the actions or inactions that are keeping your library from the commitment or priority.

During the examination of the commitment and obstacles, identify the individuals involved in the work as this will help you understand the complaints and commitments as your organization works through the conflict or issues. This is a crucial step, especially for new library directors, in understanding the organization and the values of individuals and/or departments and their role in the complaints and commitments.

Language of New Year's Resolutions to the Language of Competing Commitments

As an organization continues to explore the issues before them, this may make some individuals uncomfortable. Frankly, this is a good reaction for members of the organization to have as it means that they are actively thinking about change. In looking at your resolutions, examine what if you did or did not do the opposite action noted? This will likely reveal a fear or worst case scenario. Using our example above, what if additional book carts were purchased and distributed thorough library departments and/or assigned to individuals? Look at the fear squarely and identify the worry or angst. "These secretly held suspicions and beliefs in the consequences of pursuing their original commitments are frequently unexpected and often unsettling but they provide valuable insights into the internal dilemmas with which the participants are grappling."³ In moving through this step, participants may be either hesitant to articulate their worst fears or they may be embarrassed as "primary commitments nearly always reflect noble goals that people would be happy to shout from the rooftops, competing commitments are very personal, reflecting vulnerabilities that people fear will undermine how they are regarded both by others and themselves."⁴ The natural inclination is to stop at this first step, but we suggest that libraries need to make progress along the continuum so that organizations and individuals can discover answers and begin true transformational change.

Language of Big Assumptions that Holds Us to the Language of Assumptions We hold

At this stage, if people fear the worst then what are they protecting themselves from? Kegan and Lahey have identified this as the "big assumption" which is a deeply rooted belief. Competing commitments are based in these assumptions and weave themselves into behaviors. If we take an assumption as a truth then the very fact that we believe it to be so, makes it all the more difficult to expose it as an untruth. There are a number of steps we can take to unmask these assumptions. We also have to be very careful not to scapegoat groups in our libraries that believe in the "big assumption". One thing you can do is ask individuals to question their assumptions - all the time; this isn't, as we mentioned previously, a one time attempt to change the organization. We also need individuals to work with others in their community to talk to, people who are willing to be honest. There are a series of steps that individuals and organizations can take in looking at these assumptions. We suggest that individuals look deeply at their belief, look for ways that cast doubt on the truthfulness of their assumption, think about when one assumed that the assumption was true - actually a historical perspective, and finally, test the assumption by using some of the techniques below. Let's suggest you say that you

say you want to give more authority to your staff but you don't because you're assumption is that the staff doesn't have the experience to assume this authority...the reality is that you'd be relinquishing control.....you might say it's faster if you do it but then again it may be that maybe you'll think someone else might out perform you and you don't want to appear as incompetent. This self-introspection can make even the most self assured person uneasy, however identifying these assumptions and questioning them shows the contradictory nature of our colleagues.

Testing Assumptions

Having identified competing commitments and big assumptions, organizations or individuals are ready to test their assumptions. A test should be a small step or action in a safe environment to question their assumption. By changing behavior, an organization can determine if the worst case scenario will really happen and if their big assumption is valid. Organizations can try a small test – perhaps a pilot project for purchasing additional book carts just for one department and determine if book carts improved efficiencies and the budget was not severely impacted. In the final column of the model, individuals can record the results of the test. If the test was successful and the big assumption proven wrong, then the organization has confidence to try a second test or perhaps to implement a new process.

Working through the model does not guarantee change nor that the organization will be radically different but with practice, individuals become better at recognizing that there are underlying assumptions that are holding back an organization or individual from true change. Working through this process "...effectively uncover the roots of resistance to substantive change and provide valuable insights into the sources of the individual's seemingly unfathomable internal dilemmas and apparent unwillingness to change."⁵ A library leader might not want to go through an extensive process for each situation but with this tool and insight, one can question the competing commitment of a complaint or situation to determine the big assumption. Addressing that assumption or fear is critical to improving communication and developing language that recognizes the competing communication. Utilizing the internal languages in organizational leadership is an effective tool to improving communication and developing lasting change.

This brief summary provides an overview of the importance of language in changing organizational culture. Rest assured that there are additional areas however let's turn to the importance of language in advocacy.

Advocacy

Today's librarians need strong communication skills to work in both the political and social advocacy of libraries. The skills that are required to manage library organizations differ from skills that promote libraries. Librarians are able to influence the political agenda but to do so; they will need to tap into new skill sets that advance libraries. Advocacy of libraries requires the ability to focus on a limited set of priorities that are linked to the priorities, passion, and mission of the organization or community. Advocacy messages must be delivered in a positive and energetic fashion that translates the library organization into the modern, forward thinking

organization that it is as well as a community and resource center for citizens and students. Librarians must also deliver the message in short, succinct ways to capture the attention of busy bureaucrats and administrators. Additionally, librarians and staff must have a consistent message in working with various constituents in promoting libraries.

Using the skills developed for identifying competing commitments and big assumptions, library leaders can develop effective communication strategies for library advocacy. Every administrator and politician has big assumptions and by developing a communication plan, librarians can examine potential competing commitments and assumptions. In requesting additional collection funds for instance, a politician may fear a time when there will never be enough funds for collections. Or, the administrator may fear that an additional staff allocation will not result in services promised but maintaining the status quo. By directly addressing the big assumption and possible fears, librarians can advance their message.

Let's look at example in advocacy that examines competing commitments. A faculty member involved in developing a new collection in East Asian Studies was making recommendations on titles and specific publishers for additions to the collection. However, the library would only purchase the items from established foreign vendors who had contracts with the university. The faculty member was furious that the library was not following his explicit instructions and complained that the library was not meeting his needs to anyone who would listen. When the faculty member discussed the issue with the library dean, it was clear that the faculty member felt that the library was preventing the collection from being developed because the library would not use his vendors. The underlying commitment was that the faculty member was intent on building a collection in support of teaching and research in a new area but limited funds prevented him from acquiring as much as he was wanted. The library's acquisition department was concerned that the faculty member would overspend the account and they would be reprimanded for not balancing the budget. When the conflict was examined and it was determined that by purchasing the items through the approved vendors that the budget impact would be minor, the faculty member and the library agreed that he would continue to select books using the budget allocation as a guide for decisions and that the acquisition's department would cover the minimally increased cost of using their preferred vendor instead of the less expensive vendor (that also added time and processing costs). The result was that the library's acquisition's department did not experience its worst fear that their budget would be overspent and the faculty member realized that the library was not trying to prevent his work but was being mindful of processing costs and reliable vendors. As a result of the agreement, the faculty member changed from being a complainer to a champion and boasted about the library to every administrator who would listen. If competing commitments and assumptions are not examined and tested, the library would not change to being a more proactive organization. Excellent customer service and responsiveness is the best advocacy for libraries within their communities.

In developing an advocacy plan, librarians should examine the potential assumptions and commitments of the recipients of the proposed communication. In discussions, librarians should ask their university or community leaders if they have any concerns about a program or budget request. By examining the assumptions that

communities have, librarians can collaboratively pursue new initiatives and projects with the university or community. A shared purpose will advance library goals.

Conclusion

Librarians can use language to help develop lasting changes within organizations. By recognizing that individuals are resistant to change due to self preservation and by avoiding worst case scenarios, leaders are more emphatic to the underlying assumptions that are holding back change in libraries. Recognizing and testing assumptions will lead to transformation changes. This skill set can also be used in working with politicians and stakeholders in examining their competing commitments. By tapping into the assumptions that others hold, librarians are able to address their competing commitments and the worst case scenario to effectively deliver the library message. Language is a powerful tool and as librarians better understand and use language, they can improve organizations through successful advocacy.

¹ Brusman, Maynard. "From complaints to commitments: what are people complaining about in your organization?" Working Resources website. <http://www.workingresources.com/professionaleffectivenessarticles/article.n.html?uid=10009> p. 3.

² Kegan, Robert and Lahey, Lisa Laskow. *How the way we talk can change the way we work: seven languages for transformation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

³ Bove, Constance M., Lahey, Lisa, Armstrong, Elizabeth, et. al. "Questioning the 'big' assumptions. Part I: addressing personal contradictions that impede professional development." *Medical Education*, 37 (8): 715-722 August 2003, p. 718.

⁴ Kegan, Robert and Lahey, Lisa Laskow. "The real reason people won't change." *Harvard Business Review*, 79 (10): 85-92 November 2001, p. 88.

⁵ Bove, p. 721.