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Picking up the Pieces: Managing People during and after a Reorganization

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Abstract
Libraries need to change rapidly in response to advances in technology, expectations of users, funding, and other pressures from both inside and outside the library. Often library administration/management reorganizes personnel, duties, and departments to accomplish new goals and to shift focus of library services. Both during and after a reorganization, employees respond to the changes in a wide variety of ways, ranging from acceptance and positivity to anger and resistance. Fortunately, administrators and managers have a variety of tools available to help employees deal with change and to move them toward success. There are many books and articles on the art of implementing and managing change, dealing with resistance to change, and having difficult conversations with those affected and disaffected by change. This article will explore the application of these various tools, including examples that illustrate how any manager or supervisor can use them immediately without extra costs or resources.

Literature on Preparing for and Implementing Change
Since reorganization and institutional change occur in both the private and public sector, and across all types of businesses, organizations, and institutions, it is useful to refer to literature outside of librarianship. This broader picture of change management provides new and useful perspectives, which has proved to be applicable in the library world. Three articles and one book chapter selected as seminal on the topic of change management and used during the HERS Institute, a national leadership program designed to prepare women for leadership roles in higher education, provide an excellent representation of the literature available.

Peter Eckel and his team (Eckel, Green, Hill, & Mallon, 1999) give guidance on creating change at institutions of higher education. John Kotter (2009) in his article, "Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail," recommends an eight-step process for change management with a focus on for-profit businesses. Judge and Terrell (2013) base their book chapter primarily on John Kotter's work, but provide a list of "change levers" (p. 70), such as getting the advice of an outside consultant and running pilot projects, as a mechanism for obtaining buy-in. Finally, Hanleybrown and her team (Hanleybrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012) present ideas for using a process called "collective impact" (p. 1) to invoke change among several non-profit organizations within one community.

What is interesting about these four pieces is that the advice offered is similar, making these particular recommendations a useful focus for any change process, including changes in libraries. For example, each article advises beginning with the "creation of context" (Eckel et al., 1999, p. 27), or establishing a "real need to change" (Judge & Terrell, 2013, p. 58; Kotter, 2009, p. 2). Further, each article suggests using a team or group of some sort to lead the change process through forming a "powerful guiding coalition" (Judge & Terrell, 2013, p. 59; Kotter, 2009, p. 3) or "leading with teams" (Eckel et al., 1999, p. 27) or creating a "backbone of support" (Hanleybrown et al., 2012, p. 1). Other similar concepts include a focus on communication throughout the process and planning for short-term wins (Kotter, 2009, p. 5) through a "shared measurement" of success (Hanleybrown et al., 2012, p. 3). Since there are these similarities across these articles despite the differences in target audience, their advice is worth considering for library organizational change. What is also notable about these pieces is that each of the steps described relies heavily on excellent communication for success, but none of them provide specific advice on how to go about that communication.

For example, none of them address how to communicate an upcoming change or during a change process. When do you tell your employees, do you invite their feedback, what do you do with the feedback once you receive it, how much information should be shared, and how do you deliver unwelcome news? How is a leader to manage the resistance that is sure to come? Luckily there are experts in communication and organizational change that can help answer these questions.

Thoroughly understanding the change process, employees' reactions to change, and the impact of one's own behavior can make the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful change. Successful change, in the context of this article, is defined as moving employees from one direction to another with as little upset as possible and with the greatest amount of meeting new goals.

The Four Most Common Elements to Successfully Implementing Change
When reviewing the literature on organizational change, there are four elements mentioned and discussed frequently enough to deserve special notice, namely, effectively communicating the proposed change, non-judgmental listening to employee feedback, re-thinking resistance, and having difficult conversations with individual employees.

Effectively communicating the proposed change
In addition to the source material cited above, many other articles and books on change management emphasize effective communication throughout a change process. (Bridges, 1986; Greenhalgh & Jick, 1989; Jick 2008; Soehner & Darling, 2017; Stone & Heen, 2014; Woodward & Bucholz, 1987). Furthermore, it appears that the amount of communication necessary to implement successful change cannot be overstated. However, the question remains: what, when, and how much detail should be communicated? Communicate too little and the change may not proceed smoothly; on

the other hand, communicate too much and at the wrong time and the change will be accompanied by tremendous anxiety.

First, it is important to be clear about *what* administrators should communicate before, during and after a proposed organizational change. According to Jick (2008, p. 414), there are several items to communicate during the early stages of change: clarify expectations; describe specifically what is and is not changing; and listen to where employees feel the biggest risks will be involved for them. If properly communicated, these items will help employees deal with change because they provide employees with something concrete upon which they can rely.

Applying this theory to change within libraries, when management is preparing to implement a change to the organizational structure or duties of their employees, management should consider what current tools are available to them to clarify expectations. As part of the change process, managers should consider updating job descriptions in addition to organizational charts. Post documentation on a library intranet of the specific things that will and will not be changing. Consider employee feedback about where they need to take risks and design teams or working groups to provide support or solve problems. In addition, many libraries have standing meetings based on organizational chart groupings. Utilize all those meetings to send a consistent and positive message about the change. Make sure everyone in a leadership position delivers the same message and delivers it often. Don't be surprised that even after talking about a proposed change more than a dozen times, there will be some employees who want and need to hear it one more time.

Second, it is important to know *when* to tell employees about impending changes. Greenhalgh and Jick (1989) have clear advice on this matter: "First, managerial secrecy probably has no positive value, even when management is undecided about the details of a forthcoming change. . . . [I]t seems better to share top management's thinking about prospective changes than to attempt to conceal them. Given the propensity for such information to leak, and the strength and dynamics of rumor networks, attempts to conceal are likely to have limited success at best, and will most likely result in uncontrolled message content." (p. 323)

Frequently, supervisors are concerned about making people upset and so they often ignore Greenhalgh and Jick's advice. They hide away in secret, make plans without input, and then roll out a plan demanding immediate compliance. This process will cause employee upset as well. It is part of a supervisor's job to upset the order of things as they invoke change and hold employees accountable. If supervisors attempt to avoid this aspect of their job by not involving employees in the change process, they will most certainly create the upset they thought they could avoid, and it will most likely affect overall morale and compliance with future change.

Finally, it is important to know *how much* to tell employees prior to, during and after an organizational change. In my experience, two pieces of information are particularly

useful to consider in reorganizations. They are (1) the preparation and sharing of a first draft of the change plan; and (2) a clear statement as to who will make the final decision. As for a first draft, supervisors should see it as an opportunity for discussion that will lead to adjustments, which in turn will lead to the creation of a second, third or even fourth draft on the way to a final decision. It is vital to make clear the overall expected process and how and when employees can contribute. Making these drafts and the drafting process public will accomplish this. As for decision making, it is important when specifically asking for advice or feedback to clarify who will make a final decision. If the group thinks this is their decision to make, they will be extremely disappointed if that is not the case. This will only add to any upset they may already be feeling.

In summation, Jick (2008) states, "It is a fundamental tenet of participative management that employees are more likely to support what they help create…It is difficult to *get* cooperation, negotiation, and compromise from people who are effectively ordered to change, never listened to or supported, and then faulted if they fail to change as expected." (p. 415)

Non-judgmental listening to employee feedback
Many of the citations above discuss inviting feedback from employees, but provide very little advice on how to respond to the feedback (Eckel et al., 1999; Hanleybrown et al., 2012; Judge & Terrell, 2013; Kotter, 2009). Some others give only minimal guidance. How, then, should managers respond to employee feedback? Fortunately, other authors specializing in communication have excellent advice on managing employee feedback, and techniques for one-on-one conversations that allow for listening without judgment.

Beginning with employee feedback, Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen (2014) wrote a book on the subject of responding to feedback titled, *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well (Even When it is Off Base, Unfair, Poorly Delivered, and Frankly, You're Not in the Mood)*. While reading this entire book several times over is highly recommended, there are two recommendations that will be immediately useful in most situations: recognizing one's blind spots (p. 20); and moving from "that's just wrong" to "tell me more" (p. 77).

As for recognizing one's blind spots, Stone and Heen (2014) describe them as things one does or attitudes one has that they cannot see within themselves (p. 20). These blind spots keep supervisors from succeeding in dealing with employee resistance to change, and may even be irritating, because the actions and attitudes that are blind to the supervisor are obvious to everyone else. Stone and Heen (2014) go on to indicate that blind spots are "a key cause for confusion in feedback conversation" because "sometimes feedback that we know is wrong really is wrong. And sometimes, it's just feedback in our blind spot" (p. 77). The good news is that the authors provide a tool to use to determine what feedback is in a blind spot, called, "Tell Me More" (p. 46).

Stone and Heen (2014) suggest supervisors move away from immediately thinking that the feedback they receive is wrong. Instead, they encourage supervisors to invite the other person talk more about the issue at hand (p. 46). Asking another person to "tell me more" is not about agreeing with them. It is just one way to increase understanding so that supervisors can evaluate the feedback and determine if the feedback really is wrong, something that is beyond their control, or if it is just feedback in a blind spot (p. 20). In other words, you won't know until you ask.

In their book, *Aftershock: Helping People through Corporate Change*, Harry Woodward and Steve Buchholz (1987) recommend a similar approach of listening carefully and asking questions to clarify what another person is saying. They state, "Research indicates . . . that in instances when one individual or group tries to change another individual or group, the side advocating the change usually talks 80 percent of the time and listens to the opposing side only 20 percent of the time. It is far more effective, however, to *listen* to the reasons for the opposition . . ." (p.149).

Re-thinking resistance
As mentioned above, the four seminal pieces focusing on managing change indicate that employee resistance to any change process is inevitable, but these books and articles provide very little advice on how to deal with this resistance. For example, Judge and Terrell (2013) recommend that leaders "privately confront a resistor" (p. 71), but offer no guidance as to how to do so. Fortunately, another expert in change management, Todd Jick (2008), provides an excellent overview of helping employees come to terms with organizational change. Though Jick's entire chapter deserves a thorough reading as it has exceptionally useful advice, adjusting one's view of resistance is a critical component one can incorporate immediately without additional resources.

Jick (2008) suggests there are four aspects to altering a supervisor's view of an employee's resistance to change. First, Jick encourages managers to reframe their thinking about resistance as something that not only should be expected, but as an indicator that change is already underway as people begin to imagine a new world and its impact on them (p. 413). Resistance is messy; resistance may sound like and may actually be criticism of the abilities of the supervisor, but it is still movement toward the desired goal of the organizational change.

Second, Jick (2008) suggests that employees' resistance to change can provide important information if only one takes the time to listen carefully to what the employees are saying. Much like the authors Stone and Heen (2014), Jick encourages supervisors to use non-judgmental listening as a major component of managing feedback and resistance (p. 413). Resistors are quick to point out where there may be unintended and disastrous consequences for the organization that change initiators may not have anticipated. Resistors can easily identify whether the integrity of the system is being disturbed. For example, resistors to a change in a library service desk may point

out that the proposed change might reduce the quality of service provided to users. This type of feedback that points out where the new idea could go horribly wrong is important to listen to.

Third, Jick (2008) describes resistors as being "sensitive to any indication that those seeking to produce change fail to understand or identify with the core values of the system they seek to influence" (p. 413). An example from my own experience involved a name change of one unit from "Education Services" to "Graduate and Undergraduate Services." This name change upset some employees because it seemed to indicate the library's move away from valuing the importance of information literacy, and a move away from the core role of librarians in providing that particular service to the campus. Therefore, some employees resisted this change despite the fact that the first item on the library's new list of "Strategic Directions" was, "Promote student success . . ." and the new name more directly indicated a focus on librarian work with students. Resistors to the change were simply not willing to accept this connection as similar to having the words "education" or "learning" as a part of the name of their unit, and the resisting employees remained convinced that library administration no longer valued the importance of information literacy. If at all possible, pay attention to these comments and adjust the implementation of this change to reduce resistance.

Fourth and finally, in rethinking one's understanding of resistance, Jick (2008) suggests that instead of seeing an employee's behavior as *resistance to change*, see it as behavior *working toward change* (p. 413). For example, if a library installs a new Integrated Library System, employees may initially be frustrated with the new system as they re-learn everything they used to be able to do very easily. This is movement toward change. Even if employees sound negative in what they say about the new system, they are nevertheless using the new system and that should be encouraged. Their negative statements may also be a clue that the training provided was ineffective or simply needs repeating.

As these articles and books suggest, when managers handle initial resistance to change well, resistance becomes constructive criticism, and can actually make change more successful. Nevertheless, some employees will resist organizational change no matter what, and in extreme cases, may actually refuse to implement or accept the change. When this happens, a manager must perform one of the hardest parts of their job: having a difficult conversation. Soehner and Darling (2017) devote an entire book to preparing for and executing a more successful difficult conversation with an individual.

Having difficult conversations with individual employees
Despite using all of the tools and techniques discussed above to bring about a successful change, some employees will still be resistant almost to the point of obstruction, i.e., possibly even refusing to do their job under the newly implemented change. At that point, the supervisor and employee will need to have individual conversations to understand the issues and to further clarify and write down expectations. Since

organizations are made up of individuals, helping individuals to succeed can be a pivotal aspect of successful change.

Many of those individual conversations will include some form of conflict or difficulty. A book from the American Library Association titled, *Effective Difficult Conversations: A step-by-step guide* (Soehner & Darling, 2017), details a series of steps to take to manage one-on-one conversations that can make a difficult conversation just a little easier and can lead an employee to success. There are certainly other books about holding difficult conversations. This particular book provides simple steps to follow and is entirely focused on library organizations, making it more useful than a broad treatment of the topic. Again, while a full reading of this book is recommended, there are particular points that can be implemented right away that will have an immediate impact.

The book devotes three chapters just to getting prepared for a conversation and helps one become clear about roles and responsibilities of supervisors, along with clarifying unspoken or unwritten expectations. In the next chapter, *Effective Difficult Conversations* (2017) draws out steps to "Ask," "Listen," and "Engage to Understand" as separate steps to emphasize the importance of non-judgmental listening (p. 38-48). However, one particularly useful chapter in this book is Chapter 6, "You're not finished until you write it up" (pg 57).

The critical nature of this step cannot be overstated, particularly as it applies to holding managers and employees accountable. Without a written record, it will be as though the conversation never happened. Initially, the write up can be an informal email and should include the following information:

1. Start by thanking the employee for meeting with you and include the date of the meeting.
2. Relay what was said during the conversation.
3. Include anything the employee agreed to do, especially any agreed to changes in behavior.
4. Include anything you agreed to do.
5. Ask the other person to correct any misunderstandings, omissions, or misstatements that they believe are in the write-up.
6. Most importantly, clearly state a specific date by which you need to have a reply.
7. Finally, use the write-up to introduce forgotten or postponed issues, if applicable (Soehner & Darling, 2017, p. 58-59).

This tool of writing up the conversation is especially useful when working with an employee who frequently misunderstands what is expected. Placing expectations and due dates in writing will allow for a more factual conversation about missed deadlines or misunderstandings about who would do what.

It is highly recommended that supervisors ask for support from their human resources personnel and to keep them informed as these conversations progress. The human resources professionals can guide a supervisor with the conversation and can provide information about the institution's process of disciplinary action should that become necessary (Soehner & Darling, 2017, p. 70).

<u>Case Study</u>

An example from the author's experience provides a good illustration of the above concepts regarding effectively communicating the proposed change, non-judgmental listening to employee feedback, re-thinking resistance, and having difficult conversations with individual employees. At one time, an academic library had two distinct technology (IT) departments, one for desktop computing and the other for enterprise systems. Since these units did not often communicate with one another, duplicate systems and services were created. In an effort to merge these two groups, employees stated "that the preferred style of communication is, as one person said, 'straight up': tell them where things stand, treat them like professionals, and trust them to respond as such."

In meetings between a library administrator and an IT mid-manager who supervised employees that were affected by the change, there was a consistent message that their employees were very unhappy about the first draft of the organizational chart. Following Stone and Heen's advice (2014, p. 40), the administrator asked the manager to explain more about the unhappiness. The manager stated that "the movement of boxes [in the organizational chart] indicates a true lack of understanding of what [we] do and gave a sense that computing people have cookie cutter jobs that are easily interchangeable." This manager also said that "there were several people who were threatening to leave."

In considering what the manager had said, the administrator realized there were two important aspects to consider: what was in the administrator's blind spot, and what was beyond the administrator's control. The first part of the manager's explanation, that the administrator did not understand the details of computing jobs in the library, was in fact in a blind spot for the administrator. It was entirely possible that the administrator did not understand all the details of computing jobs in the library simply because it is frequently not the role of a library administrator to know those details. In addition, the administrator realized that there was not enough introduction or explanation of how the change process would unfold. The administrator had followed the guidance of Greenhalgh and Jick (1989, p. 323) by communicating that change would take place by sharing a first draft of an organizational chart, but there had not been enough description of the role of employees in helping to shape the change. The employees did not realize that the first draft was provided to them so that they could help shape the final version. Nor did they realize when final decisions would be made and by whom.

The second important aspect of the manager's and employees' feedback that the administrator needed to consider was what was beyond their control. The part of the manager's statement that was beyond the administrator's control was the level of unhappiness produced by providing the employees with a first draft of the proposed changes. The administrator reminded the manager of the request from the computing group, "that the preferred style of communication is . . . [to] tell them where things stand, treat them like professionals, and trust them to respond as such." Asking for transparency and then being upset over the content of an early draft document and threatening to quit seemed inconsistent. The administrator asked the manager to help the employees to see that the price of transparency on the part of administrators is vulnerability and that patience and understanding is what is required of everyone else.

The statements from this manager were classic resistance material as described by Jick in that the manager was convinced that, "those seeking to produce change fail to understand or identify with the core values of the system they seek to influence" (Jick, 2008, p. 413). The administrator asked this manager to describe in more detail the impact of the suggested changes in the first draft to better understand the roles and responsibilities of the individuals involved. At this early stage in the change process, rearranging the organizational chart was still possible and adjustments were made based on this manager's information.

As this change process moved forward, additional adjustments were incorporated into the organizational chart and a final decision was made. Individual conversations were held with two different employees who remained steadfast in their opinion that the changes would be disastrous. During these conversations, it was made clear the organization would move forward with the re-organization but that an assessment led by the individuals would take place six months after the change to evaluate the impact. This agreement was put in writing as meeting notes. Their progress toward the stated agreements was evaluated monthly and movement toward the goals was noted. These meeting notes played an important role in the annual employee evaluation process, providing evidence of conversations, agreements, support and training provided, and eventual compliance or lack thereof.

Conclusion

As libraries undergo change, it is important to note the overwhelming influence library management has on the lives of those who work in the library. Bosses can make or break a person's quality of life, the joy they find in their jobs, and their level of stress. In his book, *The Path of Least Resistance*, Kenneth Hultman (1979) points out the powerful responsibility managers have by stating, "There is no such thing as a change with a neutral impact: people will be better or worse off because of it. . . . Because the responsibilities involved are great, it is our job to systematically evaluate the pros and cons of any proposed change, and choose courses of action that have the highest probability of improving the lives of those with whom we work" (p. 47). With that in mind, effective communication is an extremely important aspect of any change process.

There are available tools to help communicate the proposed change, and tools to help make the change more successful: listen without judgment, rethink views on resistance, and hold effective difficult conversations with individuals when necessary. These tools can help provide an easier transition for both employees and their supervisors, especially when the feedback is critical of a process or a perceived or real impact of change. Since employee resistance is bound to happen when making an institutional change, being prepared for that resistance and having the steps to hold an effective difficult conversation could make the difference between a successful change and one that is unnecessarily difficult.

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