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To cite this article: William Buck (2016) Organizational Integration, Strategic Planning, and Staff Assessment in Publicly Funded Libraries, Public Services Quarterly, 12:4, 277-289, DOI: 10.1080/15228959.2016.1229643

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2016.1229643

Published online: 15 Nov 2016.
Organizational Integration, Strategic Planning, and Staff Assessment in Publicly Funded Libraries

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Library and information center services are at risk during times of extensive budget reductions. Publicly funded institutions labeled as inessential or as auxiliary departments may lose the revenue necessary to maintain full staffing. Financial circumstances of recent years highlight the importance of strategic planning in library and information center management. Although typically characterized as formal nonprofit organizations that depend on government expenditures and private donations, libraries are also open systems. The operations of an open system can be explained by reference to a levers model. Open systems are sensitive to the external environment and depend upon competent management for successful operation. Assessment measures are necessary for management evaluation. Poor decision making can be attributed to a lack of coherent policies in regards to employee evaluation and retention. A coherent assessment strategy is mutually reinforcing and can be illustrated by examples in the form of tables or other diagrams that locate integration policies vertically, in regards to the chosen strategy, and horizontally, in regards to how the policies support each other. The proper role of HR departments is to fairly implement the policies. Strategic planning and assessments should include standards of conduct and abide by established ethical criteria.

KEYWORDS assessment, budget, ethics, public services, strategic planning
INTRODUCTION

The 2007–2009 fiscal period is generally considered the worst recession since the Great Depression of the 1930’s (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Many government officials who did not have sufficient revenue for all programs cut library budgets in order to save money for law enforcement and medical services. Revenue loss for libraries occurred both nationally and internationally, heavily impacting European institutions as well as those in the United States. The resulting loss of jobs led in some cases to questionable attempts at reorganization schemes by directors and administrators. In the wake of these developments strategic planning, once a somewhat arcane and secretive aspect of administration, is becoming one of the more discussed and analyzed components of library systems. Interest has turned towards interactive systems models and methods of management assessment. Techniques for the successful implementation of integrative policies are being developed by forward thinking planners. As a contribution toward these positive efforts, this article attempts to provide (1) examples of reorganization efforts in the U.S. that display strategic motives, (2) a review of the levers model theory with an emphasis on management, (3) some examples of and remedies for poor or inadequate management practices, and (4) an integrated assessment strategy for staff evaluations during a budget shortfall with examples of libraries that have successfully implemented similar policies. In conjunction with the focus on planning, an example for developing objective and coherent assessment policies is provided in the form of a table, accompanied by some considerations on the role of HR departments.

BUDGET REDUCTIONS

The recession had a major impact on organizations worldwide. Most types of publicly funded institutions were effected, including academic, public, and special needs libraries. Many of the worst examples occurred in the larger northeastern cities of the United States. The mayor of New York announced that the state’s three major library systems would have to reduce their payroll by 404 employees in 2010 (Kelly, Blumenstein, Fialkoff, Hadro, & Miller, 2011). The budget squeeze was also felt in Europe, where 6,000 library positions were cut in Great Britain (Kelly et al., 2011). International examples include a 25% reduction for libraries in Iceland, a 15% reduction for Hungarian libraries, and major cuts in the university libraries in Italy (Hunter & Bruning, 2011). Although severe, the reductions were in line with the U.S. national trend as reported by Library Journal’s annual budget survey for 2010. Nationally, 43% of the survey respondents reported a decrease in staffing, with 85 full time employees lost in 2009 and 82 lost in 2010. Among large urban center libraries, 86% reported budget cuts and 93% reported reduced
staff (Kelly, 2011). In some cases the reductions led to desperate reorganization efforts by library administrators, whose efforts to satisfy the demands of spending restrictions has focused attention on hiring and evaluation policies and the strategic motives that often inform such policies.

One particularly instructive example of a reorganization with strategic motives involved a Texas library system that lost 88% of its operating budget. At the time of the 82nd biennial Texas legislative session the state was facing a budget shortfall of several billion dollars. It became evident to those who were following the budget reports that state funded institutions would have to eliminate a substantial number of staff positions. Library systems and schools were considered by state legislators as nonessential services (Barta, 2011). Approximately six months before the budget decisions, the employees who would later be dismissed from one division of an impacted system were informed that their job descriptions and titles had changed. The original title of “Circulation Assistant,” with appropriate job duties listed, would be changed to “Auxiliary Clerk” (note Lowell’s description of libraries as auxiliary institutions). The description had no particular duties listed, only that they were clerks whose auxiliary role was to assist the circulation work teams. The bias is clearly encoded into the description, as they are no longer described as essential services but as auxiliary ones.

However, the Texas legislature had taken the unprecedented step of specifying that no money would be removed from that particular division of the effected system (Friends of the Libraries & Archives of Texas, 2011). Instead, the legislature had chosen another division to be de-funded. Nevertheless, the reductions were distributed across agencies, with some full time employees, including those in the funded division, dismissed and given the chance to be rehired as part time employees. New positions were formed from combining the half time positions in the new arrangement. The elimination of employees whose function had been judged as useful by legislators in one division to protect those in another can be described as an avoidance maneuver on the part of the administration. In this case the external threat of government that does not support the library’s mission had been shown to be real, and an internal threat—for areas that were still funded—of being reclassified to shield favored elements is present as well.

**LEVERS MODEL**

Libraries are formal organizations that can be characterized as service oriented, non-profit institutions. As Lowell Martin points out, libraries provide information rather than tangible products, function as auxiliaries to larger enterprises rather than as independent agencies, and are subject to external pressures from political alliances due to this status (Martin, 1996). Publicly funded libraries always operate in a political context
because they are dependent upon financing; in most circumstances they do not provide products that could result in profits, and they do not charge for services. Therefore external environmental factors in the form of government spending and priorities are significant issues that shape strategic planning in libraries. These financial limits entail the recognition that information centers—and public libraries in particular—are open systems. They are open in the sense that they are influenced by external conditions, such as public opinion or a recession. Open systems interact with their environments in terms of an input/output process; performance in this context can be understood as gains to productivity, which can be affected by technology and other work related issues (Reddington, Williamson, & Withers, 2005). This type of perspective emphasizes the dependence of public libraries upon government funding, which is a form of sponsorship. A dependency relationship clarifies the open and political character of the institution.

Environmental conditions are often complex; during any sort of change process there is little chance of getting all of the outcomes that an administrator might intend or predict. Multiple changes can often conflict as much as they complement or reinforce. A common metaphor for change mechanisms as they relate to different parts of an information system is that of “levers” (Reddington, Williamson, & Withers, 2005). The external environment is a change lever, and there are internal organizational change levers. Usually the external lever activates the internal levers. Organizational structures function through the interaction of different parts. This insight allows an understanding of how activation in one lever can effect the other levers. In the case of public library systems, examples of these internal levers include the separate divisions, digital and automated technology, full time and part time employees, and circulation services. For a college or university environment, internal levers also include the students, faculty, teaching assistants, security personnel, and temporary workers. It should be clear that one of the most important elements for implementing library strategy is the availability of resources. The term “resources” covers a broad range of assets that contribute to a library’s success. Generally speaking, resources are the building blocks of strategy. They make possible what a library can actually do, rather than what is on its wish list. According to Analoui (2003), such resources include funding, equipment, capable supervisors, the skills of technicians, and so forth.

Strategy is a part of the levers model, but it is generally not considered to be a lever in its own right. The rationale is that strategy sets direction for the operation of the levers, but as has been noted, outcomes often do not occur as expected. Strategy is often considered as a reference point. To illustrate this, one can conceive of the planning function as a strategy that operates in response to an activation of the levers. The role in this context is primarily evaluative.
Two of the most powerful external levers for any organization are technology driven change and the change that is produced by economic necessity. The Texas system mentioned above offers special insight in part due to an institutional lack of protection such as unions, which are prohibited by state law for state employees, and in part due to the administration's efforts to redirect the impact of spending cuts. In order to see clearly how an external lever can activate internal levers, and how internal levers interact, and how these levers can be directed by strategy, a diagram is provided that shows the consequences of a budget reduction for that system. In this example the outcomes, which should result in improved performance, are compromised by an avoidance strategy.

Studies have shown that the integration of planning and strategy is most beneficial when managers view employees as a strategic resource (Analoui & Karami, 2003). Therefore, if managers and directors fail to take this perspective and treat employees poorly, that behavior may act as an internal lever that adversely affects organizational efficiency. Moreover, it should never be forgotten that it is library staff that actually turn a strategic plan into action. From a strategic point of view, organizational effectiveness depends a great deal upon an administrator's view of both professional and paraprofessional staff as strategic resources. Studies have also shown that a positive relationship exists between a library's performance and its core competencies, which is a direct function of human resource development. Given that external levers in the form of government spending and priorities will always be issues effecting organizational strategy in libraries, the value of an honest and competent manager or director should not be underestimated.

MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT

It is clear that in the wake of such powerful external drivers the administration of an impacted library must make evaluative decisions about the future status of employees. The question that presents itself here is the following: how will the criteria that administrators utilize in response to the levers be evaluated? It is the function of strategic planning to provide the policies and overall philosophical framework in which to act; however, it is up to directors and managers to honestly apply those policies. Unfortunately, the top levels of management are often not evaluated effectively. Forms of assessment tend to become less explicit the higher one moves in the organizational hierarchy (Allner, 2008). If a manager or director does not have the inclination or the aptitude to deal with task organization as it relates to the fulfillment of the strategic plan, then there is a strong likelihood that there will be no assessment measuring device that could exhibit this. Given these difficult circumstances, it is important to revisit some of the pitfalls that directors can fall into. In his classic textbook on HR management, Richard Rubin
(1991) provides the following cautionary points, classified under the rubric of “Misuses of Authority”:

- Showing favoritism.
- Making personnel decisions out of anger or spite.
- Writing inaccurate job references for employees.
- Withholding information from an individual to promote job failure.
- Retaliating against employees who are outspoken or who have merely exercised their legal rights.

The Association of Research Libraries has emphasized that good managers treat people with respect, self awareness of strengths and weaknesses, inspire trust, and are honest (Hernon, Powell, & Young 2001). What requires effective leadership oftentimes is change, which has become common in the library profession. In regards to change, many times it is not change itself that provokes anxiety among employees but the perception that the change is being mishandled by the administration. One possible example of this would be if a director were taking both retirement and current salary while eliminating positions to meet cost saving goals. It is interesting to note here that the governor was following this policy during the time of the unprecedented budget shortfall in Texas. The practice has come to be known by the term “double dipping” (Oppel, 2011).

Strategic planning strategies are carried out at the divisional level by directors and at the agency level by managers. Faculty Services Librarian Irmin Allner (2008) has pointed out that various problems are often caused by a lack of positive qualities in the administrative position specifically. He claims that a lack of self understanding can result in outbursts of anger, threats, and the inability to accept valid arguments and justified criticism. At the beginning of his article, Allner asks the rhetorical question “why do the wrong people end up in [management] positions?” (p. 69). Because there is often a direct tie-in between poor management and organizational effectiveness, he presents an organizational framework developed by Sue Faerman, “The Competing Values Framework,” which shows a strategy for organizational and leadership performance (p. 70).

Allner mentions that typical administrative failures include misuse of authority, poor decision making, and poor interpersonal communication styles. One closely related trait that Allner does not mention is attribution, when someone ascribes false motives to a person and deliberately misjudges their statements or behavior. Whatever the psychological reasons, this attribution can fall under the rubric of poor decision making, which it may be a good indicator of. Where attribution would be most evident in Faerman’s diagram is the horizontal axis, which has internal focus on one end and external focus as relating to the external environment on the other. If a manager took his/her bias against certain employees from the internal focus
end of the axis to solve the problems presented by the external focus, ineffective (not to mention unjust) decisions or recommendations could be made.

Poor management practices as outlined by Rubin and Allner can be avoided by the use of performance oriented assessments, such as the examples provided in this article. In addition, employees ought to be classified by job titles and descriptions that accurately reflect their duties. A reasonable downsizing plan seeks to reduce employee numbers by natural attrition if possible. Plans are developed for informing the employees of upcoming changes. A forecast of the number of losses that can be absorbed by natural attrition and by those who will accept early retirement are prepared in advance. Arrangements are made for employees to search for new jobs through counseling, contacting other employers, or offering the services of outplacement consultants. Finally, employees are fully informed about the plans for their future status.

The reputation and prosperity of an organization depends upon ethical treatment of individuals, and ethical behavior on the part of administrators and directors. Strategic planning should always include budgets, goals, and standards of conduct. Reporting procedures such as evaluations, time sheets, and task completion records should be established that will enable results to be monitored according to the agreed upon plan. Accountability should be judged according to the reports. Moreover, the behavior of an organization can be evaluated on how it implements fair rules.

In addition to what has been discussed there are also considerations, when making staffing decisions for libraries and information centers, on the importance of abiding by the American Library Association’s code of ethics. In particular principle 5 should be kept in mind: “We treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions” (Code of ethics of the American Library Association, 2008). Adherence to this elegantly stated principle ensures protection against a host of potential difficulties. If a lack of assessment implies the ease with which fair and consistent principles can be ignored, it also shows the necessity for explicit policies that encourage employee productivity and development.

INTEGRATION AND COHERENCE

Table 1 presents an assessment strategy that was inspired initially by Faerman’s models. However, there is a specific change of focus away from administrative roles to policies that promote and foster organizational integration. One technique for developing coherence is to integrate. Integration occurs by a vertical and horizontal scheme that maximizes mutual support.
TABLE 1 Example of an integrated and coherent assessment strategy for libraries and other organizations facing budget short falls or downsizing pressure. Assessment policies should reflect the special circumstances and individual requirements of the organization under consideration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vertical Integration</th>
<th>Retention Policies</th>
<th>Development of Performance Culture</th>
<th>Improvement Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employee Work Ethic</strong></td>
<td>Retain that sector of the organization that handles the most work volume without compromising quality service.</td>
<td>Provide incentives for regular work attendance.</td>
<td>Determine which employees have improved in productivity over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employee Skills Set</strong></td>
<td>Retain that sector of the organization that provides training and education.</td>
<td>Determine the best fit for employee strengths to duties.</td>
<td>Evaluate services for redundancy or duplication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employee Work History</strong></td>
<td>Retain employees that have the longest tenure and experience.</td>
<td>Determine which employees have the best history of performance evaluations</td>
<td>Evaluate employees based upon number and frequency of complaints against them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employee Social Interaction</strong></td>
<td>Retain those employees who have a demonstrated aptitude for teamwork.</td>
<td>Evaluate employee ability to communicate problems or issues that effect patron service.</td>
<td>Determine which employees are adaptable to change and are interested in retraining opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employee Organizational Structure</strong></td>
<td>Determine operational relationships of organizational elements (divisions, agencies) and develop a priority criterion.</td>
<td>Retain total percentage of employees by division or agency ranking based upon frequency of patron use.</td>
<td>Determine which employees have introduced successful innovations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employee Title/Descriptions</strong></td>
<td>Titles should be simple one to three word descriptors that are ranked in a clear hierarchy by pay and responsibilities.</td>
<td>Descriptions should reflect the specific skills that are required to perform the job successfully. These are understood as core competencies.</td>
<td>Ad-hoc or agency level descriptions that are different from the competency based description at the organizational level should be avoided.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The table has been developed to provide an example of how integration actually works. Vertical integration (strategic fit) occurs when policies are linked to a particular organizational strategy. The strategy in this example is to develop ways to evaluate employees for retention and/or promotion. Horizontal integration (internal fit) occurs when policies are implemented that mutually reinforce each other. In the diagram one can see how the policies support the specified strategies vertically, and are also horizontally consistent with each other as a group. When these two objectives are satisfied the result is said to be one of “coherence” (Armstrong, 2000). In the three columns, read them top to bottom to detect the vertical fit and left to right to detect the horizontal fit. There are many possible examples of this type of arrangement. The example below has been formulated within the context of an organization preparing to downsize. Since the policies are integrative, they would of necessity work against the subterfuge of a director sacrificing one divisional component in favor of another due to unprofessional concerns, such as favoritism or a fear of valid criticism.

Strategies follow policies in order for a pattern to emerge. The pattern should be a resource oriented one that encourages employee development. Although a pattern has more structure than a series of accidents or events, it can still lack coherence. Coherence can be developed by complementarities of strategy and practice, and by avoiding ad hoc or uninformed decisions. Policies are presented here that are mutually reinforcing and are jointly supportive of each other in order to match resources to organizational needs. This type of strategy also lays the groundwork for organizational expansion if conditions improve, as they in fact have over the last two years (Peet, 2015).

Empirical support for an integrative method is strengthened by noting specific cases of similar policies adopted by those who are developing plans for libraries. During the period of the recession, Columbia University Libraries created an assessment working group that set standards for training and data analysis, as well as usability requirements for online tool development. The University of Western Ontario Libraries established a priorities, outcomes, and action plan to determine service improvements in priority areas (SPEC Kit 303, 2007). Other successful initiatives that occurred soon after the recession include:

- The Ohio Library Council’s core competencies table that matches skills and behaviors to possible training units,
- the Harford County Public Library Staff Development Program which supplied a framework for recruiting, orientation, and building job specific skills, and
- the Fresno County public library’s responsibility charting tool, that assists in tracking the progress of staff involvement and task completion (Singer & Griffith, 2010).
Durham University librarian Bill Bryson and UWE librarian Jackie Chelin have provided a case study for scenario planning at the University of the West of England library. A restructuring of the academic services team was undertaken in response to a perceived need to simplify a complex structure that was inhibiting staff development. A time frame was provided within which adjustments to the Academic Services structure would be accomplished. Discussion among participants was encouraged so that a composite picture of the process would emerge, and staff could feel as if they were making a positive difference (Maggs & Chelin, 2013). The emphasis on an atmosphere of contributions and lessons learned contrasts vividly with a rigid top down approach, such as is depicted in Figure 1. All of these examples provide helpful techniques that can be used as practical applications by library managers.

As has been mentioned, employee assessments and evaluations are sometimes weighted by the type of titles that are given to positions, titles that are often formulated to mask the bias intended against individuals holding the altered job description/title. These titles/descriptions can either be made too misleading, such as “auxiliary” with the connotations of expediency or redundancy (as opposed to essential functions such as
“circulation” or “reference”), or too generic, such as “services” which is an umbrella term that does not specify any required duties. Such nomenclature games can be avoided by consulting a framework that includes a list of specific criteria. One possible objection to any type of prepared criteria is that there is an employment-at-will stipulation in certain states that allows employers to fire an employee for a good reason, a bad reason, or no reason at all (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001). However, if this is taken as the be-all and end-all of employee relations, then the human resources unit is no longer required. If the HR function is to be given no value or role in organizational strategy, then those departments are redundant and should be eliminated.

A further consequence of a redundancy threat is that human resource departments may allow their professional duties to be compromised by directors when evaluating employees. Signs of a compromised role in contrast to an employee development role include posting job openings with requirements tailored for a favored internal candidate, selectively posting job openings externally, disregarding employee attendance records, allowing favored employees to take extended leaves of absence, and not informing employees of policy changes that will directly impact their employment status. Human resource departments should not be in the business of lending credibility to these types of actions. As has been emphasized, strategic planning should be guided by the ideas that people are a source of competitive advantage and that effective management of human resources should lead to improved performance of the organization. Nevertheless, some researchers have shown that although human resource policies claim to be concerned with employee development, outside of a crisis policies are often ignored, and in more complicated cases provisions are made for unfair treatment (Paauwe, Guest, & Wright, 2013). Administrators and the HR staff that assists them can help or hurt employees depending upon the ethical standpoint that is adopted.

The focus on internal employee assessment and development transforms naturally into a services oriented perspective for the external community. Libraries and information centers have become much more than simple lending depositories for print material. The American Library Association’s State of America’s Libraries report for 2014 details the transformation of libraries into “community anchors” that develop programs specifically for the community in which they are embedded. The study mentions a number of outreach programs, such as the Young Adult Literacy Program, the Fresh Start program for ex-offenders, and book collections provided to homeless shelters (State of America’s Libraries Report, 2014). Moreover, libraries are important places of refuge for those who are impacted by hard economic times. Communities are therefore stakeholders in the continued support of libraries. Information has value, and a lack of access to information can result in the loss of employment and other benefits (Buck, 2016).
CONCLUSION

Currently the situation is very different from the years of the last recession. Funding levels for most libraries and information learning centers are stable or increasing. External economic and political levers have been favorable for the maintenance and in some cases expansion of library services. Overall consequences of the recession include a reconceptualization of the library as a community center and an increased interest in strategic planning. The library as an open system continues to reflect the technological and social changes occurring in surrounding environments. There is never a time, however, to fall into a sense of complacency. Assessment measures for competent management are necessary and essential features of the library profession. Coherent integration policies that are mutually reinforcing are not easy to develop, but the example provided should serve as a working template for managers and administrators. Institutions that adopted policies that can be considered integrative and were successfully implemented during the recession include Columbia University Libraries, The University of Western Ontario, Ohio Library Council, Harford County Public Library, and Fresno County Public Library. Related concepts to strategic planning such as “scenario planning” have been successfully developed and implemented. Whether in times of austerity or abundance, library professionals and support staff have proven their enduring value.

To conclude, it is the ultimate goal of these guidelines and provisions to create an improved work environment for staff and patrons. In this context perhaps even organizational “cultures” can be evaluated for success. A culture that treats people with respect, awareness of strengths and weaknesses, inspires trust, and is honest, is better than a culture that is secretive, authoritarian, fearful of change, and evasive. This is no academic abstraction. The quality of our lives, the integrity of our profession, and the prospect of developing helpful and friendly information centers depends upon the recognition of that reality.

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