

# Swimming Upstream

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**SUMMARY.** “Swimming upstream” suggests a leadership model in our era of chaos and complexity that replaces the traditional hierarchical command and control way of leading in libraries. It requires the leadership actions of connection, contributions, and collaboration to build trust, success, and a healthy library system. doi:10.1300/J118v25n01\_08 [Article copies available for a fee from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service*: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by *The Haworth Press, Inc.* All rights reserved.]

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### INTRODUCTION

“Swimming upstream” suggests a leadership model in our era of chaos and complexity that replaces the traditional hierarchical way of leading in libraries. It requires the leadership actions of connection, contributions, and collaboration to build trust, success and a healthy library system. This article:

- Discusses traditional and current change theories and practices, focusing on our current environment of constant change, and a letting go of the status quo
- Provides two examples in public libraries that required taking the leadership role in times of major change and stress
- Provides a model for leadership based on connection, collaboration and contribution
- Offers suggestions for leading in a world of chaos and complexity.

Woodrow Wilson said, “If you want to make enemies, try to change something.”

But if you don’t listen to customers, you will lose them. If you ignore staff, they will leave . . . or unionize. If you don’t actively welcome children and youth, they will grow up believing you are irrelevant. If you do not hear your community, your hours will be cut, materials budget cut, staff cut, and reputation threatened. If you do not hear your funders and local Council or Authority, they will fund another project, a park, a tractor. If you don’t respond to your Board, they will not respond to you. They might not hear you at all. They might ask you to leave. If you don’t change, you will wither and die. If you do change, you will make enemies . . . and even on a good day, you may feel you are swimming upstream.

For many of us, our youth and careers were marked by stability. Change was inevitable, but was followed by periods of stability and constancy. One of the earliest change models, promulgated by Kurt Lewin, called for *stability, change, stability*: a freezing of the situation, followed by *a* change, which in turn was followed by a refreezing of the situation, or a new normal (Lewin). We no longer have that period of stability. There is no refreeze; there is only the “permanent whitewater” of constant change (Vaill). It is less important today to learn something

new—a new skill, technology or technique—than it is to learn how to learn, as change continues to be constant.

Change is coming at us with increasing frequency, from many directions, locations, places, and levels of urgency. And not one at a time; in multiplicities. You've lived with it in the past ten years or so . . . possibly without taking a breath. You've gone to a customer-centered staffing, service, and materials model, indeed from "books" to "materials." You are networked, have partnerships, and operate 24/7. While not leaving bricks and mortar, you've added clicks, teams, technologies, talent management, and staff competencies. The library is more flexible and adaptable, less hierarchical and linear. You are sharing control and realize you can't do it alone. Your future success, indeed your survival, depends on your ability to adapt. This is a time to look at ourselves and make conscious choices, which of course is not easy in an age of permanent whitewater. There is little time for reflection when the rapids are coming at you with increasing force, speed, and duration. One can only learn how to adapt, to trust the process and to trust people. In fact, the biggest challenge for leaders is often more personal: "Senior executives were good at championing change but poor at changing themselves" (Hout and Carter).

### ***WHY CHANGE? THE HARD FACTS***

Change is more likely to come not because the leader sees the light, but rather because she feels the heat.

Sometimes leaders choose to make changes in their organizations so they can stay on the cutting edge. More often, and more painfully, changes come about because of problems or circumstances that may be beyond the leader's control. Demographic, technological, leadership, political, and budget changes can all lead to new models and new ways of looking at and being a leader. It's not easy. It's often painful.

### ***NEW LEADERSHIP, NEW MODEL: THE INDIANAPOLIS-MARION COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY STORY***

We are moving the model at IMCPL toward self-service, more popular collection, centralized telephone reference, and 24/7 Web access. We are making the change because of customer demands and because the

old staff-intensive model is no longer affordable. Patrons are responding to the new model by demanding more and more, and it has worked. In 2006, circulation increased 20% and door count 5%. They are happy with our changes.

Budget savings are necessary to plan for opening a newly-transformed Central Library without additional money. *Utilities alone at Central will cost us \$2,000,000 a year.*

There is never enough time. Beginning a new job is difficult under the best of circumstances, but during the first few months as CEO of IMCPL I faced unwelcome changes that came at an alarmingly fast pace. I discovered that a special audit was being conducted on library finances; the Central Library building project was halted because of major construction problems; the State Legislature passed a bill taking budget authority away from the Library Board and giving it to the City/County Council; and the Council cut our operating budget \$1,500,000 with the promise of more cuts based on cost overruns associated with the Central Library project. There was barely enough time to introduce myself to staff before making cuts and streamlining operations. No time to make alliances, no time to reflect on IMCPL culture, no time to educate the Board. It was a challenging time, indeed, to be a leader.

My first staff forums were held to explain that we were broke and to share a plan of how we were going to meet the payroll under our reduced circumstances. I explained “happy” things, such as capping pay ranges, redlining most positions, eliminating longevity and overtime pay, eliminating health care for future retirees, instituting a moratorium on hiring, replacing full-time people with part-time employees, outsourcing, centralizing book and material selection, floating the collection to eliminate agency ownership of materials (thereby reducing processing and transit time), eliminating outreach service to senior citizens, and transferring a literacy program (and staff) to a private non-profit. This was not the vision I expected to share, yet I believed each step was necessary to restore the library’s financial health.

In addition, half of the book and materials budget was funded through bonds that were expiring. I, therefore, needed to find an additional \$3,000,000 to bring the materials budget back up to \$6,000,000, or 18% of the total budget. *The IMCPL Library Board feels now is the time to live within our means.*

Other libraries which either ignored or resisted the need for change have begun feeling the consequences. As an example, the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library System chose not to change ten years ago after a consultant predicted disastrous financial problems. Not adapting

to this news resulted in the closure of over ten branch libraries and deteriorating service to taxpayers.

“Living within our means,” the Board’s mantra, has implications not only for the library’s patrons, but also for staff. The public, as I indicated, is happy with more books and materials on our shelves and longer open hours. But staff . . . well that is another story! The most difficult change for staff involved centralizing collection development and emphasizing more popular material. You can probably hear the comments:

Management is dumbing-down the collection;

There is a lack of specialized materials since Central subject specialists no longer have primary selection responsibility, and

Weeding out older books to make way for newer books is ruining the library.

Soothing staff fears about the collection continues. Initial comments and concerns from patrons about perceived changes, motivated by a few vociferous staff, have now lessened as the staff realizes that patrons *are* indeed being served. Also, patrons are reminded that our collection extends beyond IMCPL through ILL. If you need to make severe changes to long established practices, remember that not all staff will be onboard with changes, ever. A few of ours want to form an employee union.

Staff is also not happy about their decreased earning potential. However, philosophical changes, such as centralizing collection development, are more troublesome to staff than wanting more money—which is typical for library workers.

Management staff has also had to cope with many fewer full-time staff and many more part-time and hourly employees. Turnover is greater and more training is necessary, which does change the corporate culture. Where full-time staff people tend to stay, part-timers move on at will. Full-time staff become worried that they are endangered, causing resentment and fear. Until our budget situation stabilizes, staff will be justified in their resentment and fear. We are looking at outsourcing processing and cataloging; introducing self-service for DVDs, thus reducing the need for circulation staff; and working on how many master’s-degreed reference librarians are needed based on dwindling reference transaction figures.

Staff who will thrive under these circumstances are comfortable with change and see that patrons are being served well. But even the most

flexible staff members can be confused and feel threatened by the number of changes and the speed at which they are occurring. If it is difficult for the leader to navigate in permanent whitewater, it is equally—or perhaps more—difficult for the rest of the staff. After all, most of us not only value what the library does, we believe that we do our jobs well. Questioning and changing the status quo brings confusion, anger, and grief at the loss of those things that are familiar, and that we value.

### ***LEADERSHIP IN AN AGE OF CHAOS AND COMPLEXITY***

Faced with such serious and complex issues, it's evident that the model of management and leadership we learned, that of command and control, is not going to survive in an era of complexity. As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, command and control characteristics, values and leadership behavior are very different than the characteristics, values and

FIGURE 1. Values and Leadership Actions Under Traditional Command and Control Organizational Models

| <b>CHARACTERISTICS</b>   | <b>SYSTEM VALUES</b>                                       | <b>LEADERSHIP ACTIONS</b>  |
|--|--|--|
| Hierarchical, top-down structure<br>Control as organizing force<br>Predictive<br>Organization as machine | Efficiency<br>Expertness<br>Replication<br>Standardization | Commanding<br>Controlling<br>Delegating and/or<br>communicating downward |

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FIGURE 2. Values and Leadership Actions Under Chaos and Complexity Organizational Models

| <b>CHARACTERISTICS</b>   | <b>SYSTEM VALUES</b>   | <b>LEADERSHIP ACTIONS</b>                   |
|--|--|---|
| Flat, networked structure<br>Change as organizing force<br>Flexible, adaptive<br>Organization as living system | Relationships<br>Effectiveness<br>Openness<br>Local solutions<br>Information sharing | Connecting<br>Contributing<br>Collaborating |

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leadership behavior demanded of us in today's era of complexity and change (Wheatley).

One primary characteristic of a complex system is its flat, networked structure. More emphasis is placed on peer relations and informal networks of information sharing. For example, a circulation assistant can email the IT Director to get information, provide customer feedback, or request services, making it more likely that customers can be served at the first point of contact. Complex organizations expect change and, therefore, they organize around it, quickly responding to emerging events or trends. This is in contrast to command and control, where change is viewed as disruptive and where the library—especially the library director—tries to control events. Leaders who want to make their libraries more adaptable will find ways to encourage staff to communicate up, across, and down the organization as needed.

The leader's goal needs to shift from trying to control change that is often out of our immediate or direct control, to *being opportunistic and responding* to change that makes library programs and services adaptable within our communities for our constituents. Examples of adaptability abound. We now have coffee bars that serve as a central hub for social and intellectual connections. The Web or internet has extended our reach to more and different users. We are open 24/7. The library goes to hospitals, schools, day care, nursing homes, and community centers. Libraries are very much alive and integral to the communities we serve. Our libraries are living systems.

In order to maintain their adaptability and take advantage of key changes in the environment, libraries need to encourage people to create and maintain many informal relationships. Libraries need to be highly networked, both internally among staff and employees, and externally with customers, constituents, partners, public officials, and other stakeholders. Building and sustaining relationships is critical because it is a primary way the library can find out "what's going on" in order to monitor activity and change. Complex organizations tend to be very open because they rely on critical information networks to get work done. Information sharing among members of the library becomes a top priority, allowing people to respond positively to events and decisions that impact the organization. Mutual trust among staff is critical in order to create and sustain healthy relations that contribute to openness and information exchange. For example, it is possible to create a budget through an open process. Rather than begin the conversation with a few people in the room, an open process encourages input from all departments. Budget allocations and tradeoffs can be set by the larger group or

team if key priorities and strategic initiatives are communicated and shared by team members and the executive staff. Project budgets can be shared among team members and tradeoff decisions made in the same way. A staff used to working in this way can more easily collaborate to deal with more serious issues when they arise.

We need to emphasize *effectiveness over efficiency*. Effectiveness means that people consider solutions that serve the stated needs of your partners and constituents as a first priority. What is effective may not necessarily be efficient and vice versa. In many instances, project designs and outcomes can and should be both effective and efficient. Beginning a discussion of the effectiveness of current practices is a good way to quickly identify the values—and sacred cows—in any library. In some libraries, considering how to use MLS staff most *effectively* to meet customer needs will spark a spirited discussion about how many MLS staff are needed and what tasks it takes an MLS to perform *effectively*. In some libraries, having a staff of MLS-prepared catalogers was once considered an *effective* practice; now, most public libraries consider that to be neither effective nor efficient.

In complex organizations, local solutions are favored over replication and standardization across the system. For example, the same new Young Adult program that is being implemented in a San Francisco Bay Area suburb will not necessarily work the same way in Phoenix or a suburb in the greater Baltimore area or even in San Francisco's center city or Chinatown. In addition, centralized collection development works best when particular needs of local branch libraries can be accommodated. A good rule of thumb is that 70% to 80% of a process can be replicated across different branches, but the remaining 20% to 30% needs to be modified to meet local needs.

### **CONNECTION, CONTRIBUTION, AND COLLABORATION**

Leadership actions that make chaos and complex systems work are *connection, contribution and collaboration*. Leaders working out of this framework focus their energies on connecting. *Connecting* is a critical leadership skill because connections support and make possible the relational structure that fosters information sharing and keeps the system open and working. These leaders create and sustain connections both internally among employees and externally with the community, city or county government, and other relevant stakeholders. Leaders

also re-form and even change connections based on the library's goals and strategies, priority projects and political processes and key players, including appointed and elected officials. Leaders take actions that are situational; they take advantage of change to move and leverage the organization so that it is always positioned for growth and success. *They make sure the library always has a place at the table.*

The work of leaders involves *contribution*, the second action, consisting of linking to and making explicit each employee's specific work or job and tying it to the success of the library's goals and strategies. In other words, each employee needs to be able to see how she or he makes an impact in the overall success of a project or the everyday running of the library. We view our people resources in terms of job functions and, therefore, make assumptions about what employees can and can not do based on their formal role. Yet people have multiple talents and gifts that are sometimes underutilized at work because they are not encouraged or allowed to work outside of their specific job duties. Identifying contribution as a key leadership focus enables people to form new and different relationships and share information across departments. It encourages creativity and often inspires excitement among employees because more of their talents are being utilized. It breaks down boundaries and fosters networking within the library and between the library and its stakeholders and partner organizations. In other words, it helps to keep the system healthy and strong.

*Collaboration* is the third reinforcing action. Collaboration refers to the way we do our primary work. It is used when problems or situations are viewed as complex, new, unfamiliar and challenging. Collaborating on projects, programs, budgets, and strategic plans creates a sense of shared understanding and interdependency among staff members. It also results in effective and creative solutions because more people are involved at the outset. Collaboration brings in more diverse perspectives and talents. Collaboration can also be slow and messy because team members have to work out differences and be willing to make tradeoffs on behalf of the good of the whole team, rather than one individual's needs. Leaders need to encourage collaboration because of the value it brings in implementing new programs and services and solving big and complex problems. If library leaders are not engaging their employees and stakeholders in the work of connection, contribution, and collaboration, the library will find it difficult to respond effectively and quickly enough to changes in the environment.

### ***OUR “BOTH/AND” WORLD***

These two approaches—command and control, and chaos and complexity—are both present and active in our daily behaviors and actions. The reality is that we live and work in what we call a “both/and” world. At times our teams and libraries reflect the characteristics of command and control; at other times they are highly responsive and adaptable to change. There is a natural and necessary tension between these two influences and ways of leading. Library leaders need to be able to navigate so that libraries can maximize the benefits of each approach. Too much of either is not healthy and can result in underperforming projects and target shortfalls. If a leader, team, or organization is overbalanced toward command and control, then people will experience the organization as rigid and bureaucratic (lots of rules and policies that tend to delay decision-making or prevent people from getting the real work done), stifling (lack of initiative and creativity because people are afraid to take risks for fear of retribution), and out of date with current management and leadership practices. On the other hand, if a library is too chaotic and reacts to all change, then people will experience it as too disruptive (not enough stability or consistency), slow moving in terms of decision-making (usually characterized by an over reliance on consensus), and a diffusion of vision or focus (deploying scarce resources on multiple or too many opportunities and initiatives).

### ***TRYING TO GET IT RIGHT***

Unfortunately, there is no perfect environment, no laboratory where a leader can apply the principles of Connecting, Contributing, and Collaborating and guarantee a good outcome. In most real-life situations, one or more of these things can happen:

- Communication goes awry. It’s easy to assume that people hear what is said, or understand what it means to them—when in fact, most of us need to hear it more than once and need time to absorb it. The situation may be so urgent, or so rapidly-evolving, that there is not enough time to share information widely. If the news media are interested, staff and even Board may be learning about unfolding events through a reporter. Without full, frequent, and frank communication, it is hard for a leader to establish and maintain trust.

- A new leader who “inherits” a crisis may not have enough time to establish trust, or even a good working relationship with staff and Board before he or she has to act. As a result, staff may not perceive a need to change, may not see clear direction, or may disagree with the direction because the leader has not had time to establish credibility.
- Board members may disagree with each other or with elected officials, and the leader can be caught in the crossfire.
- When quick action is required, solutions are sometimes designed without enough staff involvement—or without having the right people involved.
- Leaders and senior managers have often had longer to think about the changes that will need to occur, may forget that other staff members need some time to absorb the information, and become impatient with the normal process of change and transition (Bridges).

When the change is out of the leader’s control, and when staff experience fear, they often express that fear by having unreasonable expectations of the leader. In truth, no leaders can guarantee safety and security. The best they can do is to try to get it right, usually with less than sufficient information.

### **WHEN IT WORKS**

When a leader is able to navigate the “permanent whitewater” successfully, the transformational impact on the organization may be felt for years to come. Consider the story of the Carroll County (MD) Public Library, a county system threatened with a 14% budget cut in the late ‘90s because of a downturn in the state’s economy. In this case, the leader was also Linda Mielke. Her strategy was to flatten the organization in order to avoid layoffs while maintaining service to customers. A number of the short-term strategies were very unpopular with staff, and some of the longer-term changes were controversial as well. For example, the library chose to eliminate registration for storytime programs in order to save staff time and allow more people to attend the programs. This decision was made in order to increase both efficiency and effectiveness, and triggered a series of conversations about what constituted a *quality* program experience. The bottom-line result was that program attendance increased and more library customers were served. But the real transformation occurred because the library moved to cross-functional teamwork—a decision by senior leaders to change themselves and share their power. Teamwork took several years to become fully institutionalized,

but it has allowed staff at all levels to *contribute* their skills, *collaborate* with each other, and *connect* with each other and the community to create results they care about.

### CONCLUSION

There are no guarantees that leaders can guide their libraries safely through the many challenges sure to come. Even the most astute leaders may find themselves unable to finish the job for reasons beyond their control. In some situations, leaders must look at themselves from the beginning as change agents whose job is temporary. But even without guarantees, it is possible to prepare for the unknown. The most effective preparation is to concentrate on the quality of relationships and engage staff in meaningful work together. Working together in this way, leaders and staff make it more likely that their libraries can not only survive turmoil, but grow and thrive. And for many leaders, helping their libraries transform means being willing to transform their skills, their leadership styles, and themselves.

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