
Volume 11
Number 2
*Special Double Issue: Thriving on
Change...Embrace the Possibilities (Fall 2005)*

July 2014

What Can We Say About Managing Change?

Mike Smith
Hillsboro Public Library

Recommended Citation

Smith, M. (2014). What Can We Say About Managing Change?. *OLA Quarterly*, 11(2), 10-11.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1084>

© 2014 by the author(s).

OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

What Can We Say About Managing Change?

by Mike Smith
*Assistant Director
Hillsboro Public Library*

Sometimes getting ready for change or making changes or dealing with the aftermath of change seems like all library managers do.

A good example is the change from second generation (so-called 'legacy') integrated library systems to third generation, graphically oriented systems. The bad surprise here is that some, or a lot, of the functionality of the old systems is not in the new ones. The library manager is hard pressed to explain the benefits to balance the pains of change that the staff and public are feeling.

Managing change

Try to put yourself in the place of staff, patrons, supervisors and elected officials. What will this change mean to them? What are their questions about it? You might just give up on guessing and ask them!

Inform people often and in a variety of ways. Library managers I have admired talked to everyone—staff, city administrators, board members, other library managers, even salesmen—about what is happening next, especially the why part. One of these admirable managers wrote a monthly column for a national publication. I found whole sentences he had spoken to me over the telephone written in his column months later. Now that's getting your patter straight.

Be sure everyone on staff knows why the change is happening and is prepared to tell the public more than one good reason that it is taking place. If the public can see the change, they have a right to know why it was made. Don't leave your staff at a loss for words. Don't give them the task of making up something!

Other than some personnel matters and some records the law recognizes as confidential, there are no decisions that you can keep secret in a public agency. Secrecy is the domain of the private sector.

Use as many avenues of communication as possible to explain major changes. For the staff, do not hesitate to repeat yourself in newsletters, e-mails, staff meetings and casual conversations. The general public and your patrons are the hardest to reach. Handouts at the library, press releases, banners in parades, cable TV programs, and Web sites: use as many means as you can when big changes are in the works.

Tailor your pitch to your audience. Library staff will want all the details on how you arrived at your conclusion to make the change. They will also want to be fully informed about the impact on their own jobs. Elected officials, administrators and board members will probably prefer a summary. Sell benefits in the language and level of detail your audience is ready to hear.

Timing the release of information is also important. You don't want your staff to discover that their jobs are changing by reading about it in the local newspaper. Library boards and city councils do not want to feel bypassed regarding important decisions.

- Involve supervisors and front line staff as much as possible when planning to implement change.
- Make training easily available, send materials in advance, give easy access to documentation, and offer review sessions.
- Do the same with new releases of software. Provide summary documents about the changes most relevant to front line staff. Sell the benefits of change!
- Be sure to update your procedures manuals and new employee orientation process.



- See that copies of old policies and procedures are not floating around. And if you find an ironclad way of doing this, please tell me how!
- Recognize teams and individuals who make an extra effort to help the project.
- Celebrate major milestones in a project as well as its conclusion.
- Evaluate the change: did it accomplish what you wanted? If so, remind everyone what the objectives were; they will need that reminding when dealing with the inevitable complaints from patrons and other staff.

Deciding to make a change

Most library managers in Oregon work in small enough libraries that they take part in the decision to make changes.

Don't make changes that are not necessary. They are expensive in many ways. One is public good will. Another is the good will of staff. Neither of these is without limit. Change 'for its own sake' is a waste of your political capital.

Take advantage of the report generating capabilities of your integrated library system. Statistical reports can help you put a perceived problem in perspective. For example, your staff is complaining about spending too much time working on holds/reserves and thinks that limits should be reduced on the number of holds one patron can place. You run a report and find out that 97 percent of the patrons who have holds have less than four active at any given time. Would lowering the maximum number of holds possible solve the overall handling problem? Probably not.

Changes should be part of ongoing processes and should be evaluated. As the authors of the PLA 'for results' series

remind us again and again, "The best decision-making model is to estimate, implement, check, and adjust—and then estimate, implement, plan, and adjust again." (Mayo and Goodrich, *Staffing for results: a guide to working smarter*, Public Library Association, 2002, p. ix)

Back when my hair had not been turned white by managing change, it seemed like city administrators and even library boards didn't really know what library directors did for a living. You could get away with a lot of changes 'just because.' I can remember another library converting from Dewey call numbers to LC and, when a new director arrived, back again to Dewey. I can remember a public library director deciding to discard the entire fiction collection. And they let him do it! It seems like we are held more accountable today: you have to be ready to explain everything to everyone and be able to relate everything to the bottom line.

With today's budget pressures, inter-linking library cooperatives and AM radio attack jocks, I don't know if young library managers have the opportunities to try things and learn by making mistakes the way we used to. On the other hand, there is good and sensible planning and management help available in the PLA "For Results" series. The young library manager could do worse than involving her local library community in that planning process. 🌿

Michael R. Smith is now the Assistant Director at the Hillsboro Public Library. His changes have included working for a library vendor (DYNIX) and serving as Director of the Forest Grove City Library.

