Library Leadership in Turbulent Times

By: Michael Crumpton

Abstract:

Libraries have been and are facing difficult times from a variety of directions. With a wave of book challenges across the country and a decline of support for institutions of higher education, library leadership is faced with enhanced challenges to meet service and mission objectives. How does library leadership maintain resilience and find capacity for action during these turbulent times? How does the organizational culture of the library reflex library leadership's intention for moving the organization forward?

Keywords: leadership | libraries

Article:

Introduction

The last four years have been difficult times for everyone, starting with the pandemic and moving into an era of global conflicts and inflation. In many cases financial support for libraries, either through the higher education institution or for public libraries through state/local/community support is declining.

Many of these issues have disengaged employees and their purpose. Users within the stakeholder community in some cases have developed different expectations for library services and the influence libraries provide. A changing culture of accountability creates different challenges for leaders to bring a focus back together for the organization to meet new expectations from stakeholders.

Library leaders are not only tasked with finding solutions and pathways for moving the organization forward but also keeping an engaged and productive workforce to do the job(s). Keeping a strong and motivated workforce creates challenges for both finding the right balance or capacity of influence and developing a resiliency model that is sustainable and motivational.

Resiliency at the breaking point

The term "resiliency" is used to define a way to thwart adversity or barriers to progress and is meant to be a desired skill set for forward thinking leaders. The issues that surround us in recent times, the pandemic, inflation and political changes have pushed individual resiliency to a breaking point. The question becomes, how to move forward to get to a more stable set of circumstances, in order to grow and develop beyond this unstable time.

Library leaders who maintain a desired for regulation, rules and policies enforcement, offset the flexibility and adaptability needed to consider options that encourage resilient behaviors in others. Resiliency needs innovation and creativity to become stronger, especially as a leader who is determined to motivate their employees or stakeholder groups to see past the barriers to move forward.

Many of us are familiar with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, but probably less familiar is Maslow's Grumble Theory. In his "Hierarchy of Needs", Maslow says that human beings have six basic needs which are organized in a hierarchichal order of importance. According to the theory, one can't get to the next level of needs until the present need has been satisfied. Understanding and finding ways to be creative with helping others meet their needs can also help create a resilient point of view during unstable times.

Understanding grumbles and seeking resilient paths for people also requires a strong commitment to emotional intelligence skills, to not only be self-aware of your own concerns but also to help regulate how others feel and their resistance to adversity. Some examples of the kind of actions that leaders can take to mitigate employee concerns are:

- Using self-awareness, maintain your own sense of emotional stability, when faced with barriers or difficult situations/decisions.
- Help put stressful experiences into perspective, so they are not dwelled upon.
- Teach tolerance to ambiguity and uncertainty to more readily adapt to new circumstances.
- Recognize that mistakes or setbacks will occur and be prepared to pivot as needed.

It is also important to note that employees will have different levels of a resilient point of view. Everyone has different experiences or circumstances, i.e. loss of loved ones, child/elder care issues, economic instability, so everyone's level of resiliency is subject to their own world view. This must be recognized in order to not create a bias for those who resist, but to serve as a tool to help people see a broader, more positive, perspective.

What is your capacity for managing more?

Thoughtful leadership can be most at risk during turbulent times, especially if part of the turbulence is related to changes in the work environment that reduce staffing or the amount of supervision present. Having the capacity for higher levels of needed attention can be both exhausting and unsustainable in the long term.

Leadership capacity is your ability to lead others and the organization effectively. It can include both your natural abilities, but also learned skills and techniques. Sometimes personal qualities can make someone well-suited for responsibilities, and it's important to keep a check to prioritize personal and professional activities and to remain committed to staying fresh and growing in a leadership position.

Librarians serve as the professional leaders to drive the ethical practice of fulfilling our mission of the libraries as an organization. To that end, a conversation on organizational leadership would provide the following benefits and outcomes:

- Recognition of the influence that all professionals have in representing the library to campus, community and other library staff,
- Assessing and framing the librarians' role as responsible leaders,
- Develop an awareness that behavioral attributes impact all levels of communication between employees, students and faculty,
- Provide a framework for sharing as a professional critic (peer review) in a non-threatening manner for the greater good of the organization,
- Help professionals embrace the responsibility of providing proper responses and actions that can impact organizational motivation while also being accountable for positively influencing others,
- Demonstrate shared value in collaborative leadership during challenging times.

This can increase leadership capacity by reframing these turbulent experiences by creating different beliefs, with different actions that offset disengagement and refocuses motivation. Capacity is increased with refocused and engaged employees and with stakeholders who have updated expectations.

Do you have your white space?

White space can be defined as a blank space on a canvas, in an unfinished project, or in the way in which something is presented, leaving open space available for interpretation. Providing white space for mental well-being can be seen as a lack of input or stimuli related and provides the opportunity for the brain to reset or wander on its own. This can provide the opportunity to reconsider factors related to finding means for managing capacity and fortifying resilient skills.

Author Naomi Bulger cites a 2012 study from the University of California at San Diego that determined we are now consuming information at 350% of what we did 3 decade ago. For leaders, this level of information consumption limits the amount of creativity that can be applied to thoughtful execution of influence and guidance of others.

The definition of white space can include many versions or terms as to what this can mean for mental well-being and refreshment: meditation, reflection, down time, or detaching oneself to name a few. Leaders owe it to themselves to find what works best for them in order to gain new perspectives and refresh the skills needed to move forward. Don't think of a disconnect as boredom, think of it as an opportunity for the brain to process and catch up.

Conclusion

Today's library leaders are faced with difficult challenges that can specifically impact the direction and outcome of factors that drive the profession and determine an organization's value. Library leaders must practice self-awareness in order to monitor themselves for standing up to adversity and being able to maintain self.

Pulling together an organizational culture that reframes the libraries' mission and service is one way to broaden capacity but also instill resilience in others. This might require coaching and mentoring of others, but the long-term benefits can create an organization more equipped to deal with adversity.

Leaders must look for their white spaces, to reflect and let the brain work through and form different conclusions to ongoing issues. Taking the time to think is an investment in good mental health.

Additional readings and references

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