SO YOU WANT TO BE AN ACADEMIC LIBRARY DIRECTOR

EDITED BY
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Preface

IF YOU ARE A LIBRARY DIRECTOR, a department head, or a librarian with management aspirations, you have given some thought to the skills, knowledge, and characteristics that lead to success.

You might turn to a number of studies for guidance. These studies are useful because they aggregate a range of perspectives from surveys and find common attributes among them. The ability to envision a future and motivate staff to get there, to plan and budget, and to define problems and make decisions are a few examples of skills to cultivate. We know, of course, that library administrators have reached their positions by a variety of career paths. Recently collected data from midsized college and university library directors not only confirms this, but reveals that most academic library directors don't get to exercise necessary skills until they become directors. The reality is that while new academic library directors might be developing relationships and informing scholarly communities on the issues of the day, they are often distracted by the overwhelming work required to get up-to-speed on those necessary leadership skills.

Learning on the job is part of working life, even for directors. To complement the formal research on academic library directors' characteristics, I have recruited library directors to write essays reflecting on various aspects of their work as library directors.

Peter Drucker once said (and many have repeated), “Culture eats strategy for breakfast,” and so we start there, while finding our way to strategy as well. Among the topics our contributors address are library emergency planning, combating impostors’syndrome, the legal constraints in dealing with a recalcitrant employee, shared governance and multi-institutional collaboration, and cultural programming that challenges biases.

Each of the chapters in this book will give you a glimpse of the work of an academic library director and touch on areas you may not have thought of. We hope that together they will help you see where you may best apply your strengths, hone your skills, and plan your career.

PEG SEIDEN and
ELEANOR MITCHELL

1

Navigating Institutional Culture

Building Bridges and Not Burning Them

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES possess their own institutional cultures and political climates, as do the libraries within them. As a new library director, developing an understanding of your institution may be the single most important factor in your success. Your professional expertise, for example your knowledge of personnel management, of budgeting, and even your vision of the future of libraries will not hold sway if you are unable to navigate your institutional culture. The development of a good understanding of an institution, its politics and culture is something that happens over time—years, in fact. Unlike other areas of management, there is no curriculum that directly addresses the skills that enable you to deftly navigate your institutional environment. What you can do is to hone the skills that create heightened awareness of the institutional dynamic and prepare you to work within it.

Essentially, this chapter addresses what is known in the literature as "workplace politics." The political environment is the result of the way numerous factors come together: organizational or institutional culture; governance structures (formal political systems); and the personalities of the individuals who wield varying amounts of power within the institution. As administrator of the library, the director has multiple cultural layers to navigate: that of the leadership culture of peers and supervisor (vice president, dean, provost, etc.), the library culture, and the college or university culture, as well as the faculty and student cultures.

What do you need to pay attention to in order to thrive in your political environment? How are decisions made; who are the power brokers; and what is the perceived value of the library on campus? This chapter will provide you with an *overview of the elements* that comprise an institution's culture and politics. These include a discussion of both formal and informal structures within and outside the library and strategies to help you succeed in your position as a key administrator.

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Many disciplines such as sociology, organizational psychology, and management have studied workplace culture and politics. For the purposes of this chapter, the authors have focused on the literature of higher education and librarianship as being most relevant to the topic at hand. Much of the literature on this topic falls into the arena of advice or professional development. Here we note selected materials from this perspective, while referring to some of the seminal scholarship in the field for context.

Institutional or organizational culture as manifested in the workplace was explored in a systematic manner as early as the 1920s and 1930s, with the Hawthorne studies at the Western Electric Company. Intended to look at how physical working conditions could impact productivity, "Hawthorne set the individual in a social context, establishing that the performance of employees is influenced by their surroundings and by the people that they are working with as much as by their own innate abilities."[1] A now widely accepted definition of this concept was offered by Edgar Schein who, in his seminal book on the topic of organizational culture, described culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems."[2] Schein enumerates the observable events and forces that comprise group culture: behavioral regularities when people interact (such as language, customs, traditions, and rituals), group norms, espoused values, formal philosophy, rules of the game (or "the way we do it here"), climate, embedded skills (such as unwritten procedures), habits of thinking or mental models, shared meanings, root metaphors (how groups characterize themselves), and rituals and celebrations.[3] In a 2013 article featured on the *Harvard Business Review* website, Michael

Watkins distilled a conversation he facilitated through LinkedIn into a handful of principles that further illuminate the hard-to-define concept of institutional culture. Among the characteristics of culture he notes the following: "Culture is a process of 'sense-making' in organizations. . . . Culture is a carrier of meaning. Cultures provide a shared view not only of 'what is' but also of 'why is.'"[4]

A method called the competing values framework (CVF) was developed in 1983 by Rohrbaugh and Quinn, presenting a model for organizing criteria used to evaluate organizational effectiveness;[5] Cameron and Quinn's 2006 book presents a strategy, instruments, and methodology for applying this model.[6] This approach has been adopted by academic libraries in efforts to better understand organizational culture. In their 2004 article entitled "Organizational Cultures of Libraries as a Strategic Resource," Kaarst-Brown et al. consider whether there are aspects of organizational culture in libraries that can be key to personal and organizational success,[7] using the competing values framework as a method to reveal and examine these characteristics.

The literature review will continue with a discussion of workplace politics particularly with respect to the higher education environment and libraries.

LEARNING ABOUT THE INSTITUTION AND ITS FORMAL AND INFORMAL POWER STRUCTURES

Power structures in institutions of higher education are realized both through informal and formal governance and organizational structures. Colleges and universities generally have similar governance structures, with some variation depending upon affiliation (public or private) and size. For example, institutions will have a governing board, whose members may be called trustees, regents, governors, or managers. Other major players in the governance of a college or university are senior administrators (president, chancellor, and various vice presidents) and, of course, the faculty. The library director needs to understand where he or she fits within this structure. You may be on the president's staff or report to someone on the president's staff. You may also participate in specific leadership groups on campus such as the dean's or directors' group. In addition, library directors may be key members of cross-campus standing committees that focus on critical or infrastructural issues. Memberships and roles may vary depending on whether the library director is a faculty member or an administrator or whether there is a staff or faculty union.

On many campuses, committees are responsible for setting the institution's strategic agenda and making decisions about core issues as wide-ranging as benefits, budget, or the academic program. It's important that the library director be aware of the relative status and power of these committees. By virtue of their position, the library director may be required to serve on specific committees, such as the curriculum or educational policy committees. But even if she is not on a committee, she should be aware of their agendas. Even committees with no direct library connection may on occasion consider topics that impact the library. On many campuses there is a library committee or, in some cases, a joint library and information technology committee. The role of these committees can vary from simply advisory to advocacy, as can their influence. Sometimes, faculty members with the least power or influence end up on these committees. If the library director is asked to make recommendations, much thought should be given to the composition of the committee. There may be a stipulation that all divisions of the institution are represented on the library committee, but within that structure the selection of members provides an opportunity to build the strongest committee possible. If your agenda for the library is progressive, beware of the tendency for the appointments committee to appoint only bibliophiles. Look for those who see the library as more than a book box or buying club, those that recognize the library's expansive role.

The governance structures may be documented in the handbook, catalog, or on the website for the institution. Another glimpse into the institution's political and cultural framework may be provided by the strategic plan, accreditation documents, or self-studies. These documents will articulate the vision and priorities for the campus and provide the new director with a road map to follow in developing the library's program.

Informal structures extend well beyond the governance and administrative structures of the institution. They are often based on individual relationships and personalities. For example, a particular faculty member may hold undue influence because of a friendship with the president or other senior administrator; this power may wane with a change of administration. Or an individual may be very vocal and may have the support of a small but influential group of colleagues; this can give that individual's voice more authority on campus matters well beyond his own department.

The new library director will be hard-pressed to find any documentation of these power structures, nor are they likely to be immediately visible. They have generally evolved over time and are deeply embedded in the institution's culture. The best way to understand these structures and how to operate within them is in conversation with your supervisor. You may ask him to suggest key faculty and administrators that you might talk to about the institution. Identifying faculty members with strong opinions about the library should also be among your first priorities. These may be committee chairs, senior faculty, or just individuals with history or an agenda.

These informal structures are intertwined with the more formal structures and together they influence the way the institution operates and how information flows within the institution. A key characteristic that defines how these structures work together is the specific institution's shared governance model. In almost all institutions of higher education, power is shared by the faculty, senior administration, and governing board, though the actual balance of power is determined by institutional culture, history, and personalities and may shift over time. The decision-making role and amount of power that any of the major players in an institution's governance structure wield relates to the issues at hand and can vary depending on the institution. It can also vary depending on the culture of the institution: is this a top-down, more authoritative culture or is it a more consensus-building one?

One of the overarching factors that determines the library's role in governance is whether the librarians are considered faculty. If librarians have faculty status, this may put them in a different power dynamic vis-à-vis librarians who are considered "staff" or "administrators." Another factor that affects the authority of the library is where it sits in the institution's organizational structure. While most academic library directors traditionally reported to the chief academic officer such as the provost or dean of faculty, in new models and merged organizations, the library may be placed in the information technology unit and thus report to a chief information officer. In other institutions, the library director works under the supervision of an associate provost, rather than the provost.

EFFECTIVENESS IN THE INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The library's ability to achieve its objectives is dependent on its perceived value to the institution and its relationship to the rest of the community. In developing relationships with the community, the library director should be cognizant that not all of the library's friends and supporters may be equally influential. Power on many campuses is tied to funding through tuition dollars and grants, and the library's traditional advocates (the humanists and humanistic social scientists) have diminished power on many campuses as career-focused and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) curricula ascend in importance.

Even though the library may have a cadre of supporters, when it comes to the budget no one is going to fight the library's fight. In order to achieve the library's programmatic goals, you will be in competition for dollars with every academic and administrative department head. You may see the library as a common good and think that everyone will be looking out for the library, but everyone is vying for the same small piece of a pie. The context in which the annual budget process takes place is formal but is subject to informal pressures. In establishing the campus budget, the institution may be subject to parameters set by state government and/or the governing board. Usually strategic priorities for the campus will guide the budget decisions, although these may be overridden by crisis or opportunity (for example, the Great Recession of 2008). In most situations, the library administration will prepare an initial budget proposal, but the formal budget approval process will vary from institution to institution. Budget advocacy may be bolstered by alliances that are part of the institution's informal political structures and relationships. Sometimes the library director's political capital may be insufficient to advocate by herself, and these strategic alliances then become critical to realizing the library's programmatic goals.

Even where the library's practices and processes are determined internally, the broader campus community informs those strategies. For example, collections are built in response to curricular and scholarly direction, and the information literacy program relies on collaboration with faculty. Library goals related to areas like open access, digital scholarship, records management, and preservation must be "owned" by the campus, and cannot be pursued or achieved without broader support.

Dealing with Conflict

As a new library director, you must learn to navigate around various flashpoints and land mines, some of which may be very specific to the institution. These often have to do with the emotional attachments that faculty, in particular, have to library spaces, collections, and personnel. These emotional attachments are sometimes related to symbolic value that connotes prestige and power, such as having a branch library in a department or a designated bibliographer or subject specialist. They may be things you can anticipate—for example, a reaction against a plan to move print off campus to a storage facility; they may be unexpected, such as a heated response to a plan to remove the reference desk and move to a consultation model. Often the library director is caught between a rock and hard place. Senior administration may ask the director to save money or reallocate space while faculty may have very different priorities. Added to the mix are the director's own desires to implement best practices which may not align with either administrative directives or faculty preferences.

Whether the library director is an administrator or faculty member will affect how she is able to act in the environment, particularly when there may be significant distrust between the faculty and the administration. There is often a risk of alienating one group or another. If you alienate faculty, it may be difficult to rely upon them for support subsequently. For example, in times of financial exigency, the library director may be the "team player" whose decisions help the campus weather difficult periods; these decisions could potentially compromise the relationship with faculty if they call for subscription cancellations or scaling back library hours. But if you alienate your administration, though you may occupy the moral high ground you may risk severe consequences. For instance, there have been cases where library directors have lost their jobs by sticking to their principles in the face of administrative disapproval. Sometimes these conflicts revolve around organizational structure—such as a campus imperative to merge the library with the information technology area; at other times they may be about relocating or removing collections to free up library space for other campus needs, or about the pace and practicality of technological change. Much depends upon the relative power of the administration and faculty on your campus and whose team you are perceived to be on.

Many of the potential land mines derive from the changing nature of the academic library. For example, there are generational and disciplinary differences in expectations among faculty. Newly minted PhDs may come from R1 institutions where the relationship with the library around research support and collections may differ from that of a smaller, liberal arts college. One might find that a new faculty member in media studies has certain expectations about the library's role in digital scholarship. A senior member of the economics department may have a reliance on the digital environment for data sources and journal articles that might seem foreign to a historian whose research depends on access to monographs or physical archives. One can't assume that the pace at which the library moves to digital or new support models will be as comfortable for the former as the latter. People may also be uncomfortable with the shift away from a model of preemptively building collections to one that is premised on pay-per-view, where there is no longer an emphasis on developing the resources for posterity. Any decisions emanating from the library may be called into question by one group or another if those decisions conflict with their perspective on what the role of the library should be.

A key area of potential conflict relates to the way in which library space is utilized. In many libraries, space for collections is being reallocated to other purposes. Some of these purposes are consonant with the library's traditional functions, for example, classrooms and new kinds of study or work spaces. In other cases the square footage of the library is viewed as up for grabs for less closely related purposes. Libraries may be asked to find space for student support services, or information technologists, or completely unrelated functional offices. The library director needs to both respond to and define the appropriate role of the physical building. Is it primarily the center for student academic life, a social space, a place for cultural activities, or is it perceived as a place limited to scholarly pursuits and the collections that support them?

How does one navigate these potential areas of conflict? The director can learn the hard way, by attempting to implement change and running headlong into a conflict. It is preferable to develop an early warning system that avoids these snafus before they happen, by establishing ongoing communication mechanisms that inform about campus issues and priorities as well as emerging or immediate concerns. The best approach is to make connections with the broader college community both through informal (inviting them for coffee) and formal means (committee work). Secondly, one should be able to capitalize on existing connections that library staff have, with the caveat that the director should not draw these staff into the conflict. Most libraries will have a formal outreach structure that has people "on the ground" who are listening to the campus at large—that is, librarians who support different academic departments and cocurricular areas. Yet one cannot necessarily count on these librarians to identify and negotiate areas of possible conflict. For instance, the subject librarians need to be able to retain strong positive relationships with their faculty and may be reluctant to engage with faculty on sensitive issues. However, the library director should have a mechanism for gathering this "intelligence" from staff members. In addition, the senior staff member to whom the library director reports has yet broader access to conversations and decisions at higher levels, which can provide both perspective and specifics to inform the director. If you are fortunate, your senior staff member can be a wonderful partner with whom to jointly solve problems.

Building Your Street Credibility

In order to enhance your success as the library director you need to build credibility within the broader community. The strongest element in building your credibility is the quality of your work, which is reflected in the quality of library services and resources. The library director gets reflected glory or blame from every interaction that the community has with the library. Comments from faculty, students, or administrators may praise the collection, or the miraculous powers of interlibrary loan staff, or the impact of an information literacy session. These statements attest to the value of the library and establish the credibility of the director on the campus. The director's participation in campuswide committees also can influence people's perception of him or her. Beyond speaking on library-related issues, the director's thoughtful engagement with broader campus issues under the committee's consideration can solidify his or her reputation. The director's professional profile and visibility in librarianship or another academic discipline can also assist in building credibility, particularly among other administrators and faculty. Through publications, conference presentations, or professional association work, the library director can establish his external bona fides which often are seen by campus colleagues as signs of professional credibility.

Your effectiveness as a library director will depend on the relationships you develop within the formal and informal power structures. Perhaps the best approach is to build alliances with individuals and departments whose interests align with and who can support the library's mission and priorities. For example, there are a number of libraries that have developed and promoted open-access resolutions on their campuses. Those libraries that have been successful in passing such a resolution have typically identified a champion on the faculty. This is usually someone who has not only demonstrated interest in the topic, but has credibility with his or her colleagues. Beyond faculty, there are numerous other natural partners that the library director should reach out to. One might think first of information technology (IT) services because of overlapping interests in instructional technology and information management. While some level of IT support will certainly be structural in your organization, to develop partnerships and an expansive system of collaboration, it is beneficial for the library director to establish informal connections with key personnel. There may be other relationships that derive from shared space with units like student support services or writing centers. Even when these services are not located in the library, it behooves the library director to seek out her peers in these areas because of mutual concerns around teaching, learning, and scholarship. One can find examples of successful partnerships between academic libraries and many different campus entities including career services, development, alumni affairs, finance, intercultural or diversity initiatives, the dean of students' office, service learning initiatives, communications, admissions, human resources, institutional research, and the art gallery. For example, some libraries work with alumni affairs to extend access to online databases. Others work with departments such as admissions to host prospective students when they visit campus. Libraries work regularly with institutional research on national statistical surveys but also reach out to them for expertise on developing surveys and focus groups, as well as institutional review board approval. Some of these partnerships are episodic, but others are essential to the health of the library and should be sustained over time. By virtue of the core responsibilities of the library, the director will have ongoing relationships with offices such as finance, facilities, and human resources. Positive campus relationships enhance library visibility and build political capital which is there when you need it.

LEADING THE LIBRARY

When you arrive as a new library director (with your own baggage), it is important to know that the library staff also has history and baggage, and each of you will bring that to every encounter you have. There may be a honeymoon period, but you will certainly be held up in contrast (positively or negatively) to the previous director. Nevertheless, staff don't want to be compared to your previous staff, and the sooner that the new director moves beyond "the way we did it in my old library," the sooner the staff and director will bond and become a strong unit. The director's credibility within the library, among library staff, is dependent upon the local organizational culture; staff, however, need to see consistency and transparency in your decision-making so that they can develop a sense of trust in you.

Power in the library is really about the responsibility, explicit or tacit, for making decisions. Power in the library should ideally align with the organizational structure. But there are likely to be individuals who wield power outside of that structure, whose activities can ensnare the unwary director. For example, in institutions with faculty status, librarians with greater longevity and rank can challenge or even undermine the new director. Or there may be preexisting relationships—friendships, even marriages—between library staff and campus administrators or faculty which may create back channels of information and opinion that may impact the library. The director needs to be alert to symptoms that this might be happening, noting, for example, particular resistance, morale issues, or rumors from outside the library. In the same way that you build alliances outside the library, you need to build them within it. The library director cannot assume that trust with each member of the staff is automatic. He or she must work to build that trust by listening, ensuring that each staff member feels enfranchised and providing them with opportunities for engagement and leadership.

Meetings are one of the places where the power dynamics play out. Who gets included in meetings and why? By sitting at the table, one gets to have input into and influence over decisions; one hears information more directly and immediately, and has unfiltered access to opinions and perceptions. One also has an opportunity to shape the disseminated message. The new library director should understand the local meeting culture. Is there a tradition of broad inclusivity that cuts across staff at all levels, or does the library have a more segregated culture wherein only staff of a certain status are included in the key decision-making groups?

The new director should be aware of how communication happens or flows within and among staff members, beyond the structure of scheduled meetings. There are informal avenues of communication that are likely already in place: note who talks to whom, who has coffee with whom, who socializes outside of the library. The library director is often outside the library's informal social sphere, and will not have the same opportunities to develop relationships and communicate casually and informally with the staff. Thus the director may not be privy to the informal discussions about library issues and topics that will play out within meetings. To counterbalance what can be unproductive informal communication paths, the library director should ensure that there are sufficient formal mechanisms that provide staff with the opportunity to be enfranchised, be well informed, and participate in the conversation about the library's future. It also behooves the library director, as a participant in multiple campus forums and as someone privy to information from different venues, to provide library staff with perspective and help them make the connections. The library director may be caught between a rock and a hard place. Sometimes staff opinions may run counter to the position of the library director when it comes to reconciling campus needs with library priorities. The library director runs the risk of alienating staff in order to seemingly appease campus interests. The staff may not recognize that there is a larger benefit that accrues to the library (often in terms of political capital) in making unpopular decisions. The library director has to weigh competing interests and potential consequences. While the library is your arena, your decisions are made in the context of institution-wide priorities and values.

STRATEGIES FOR YOUR SUCCESS

What are the strategies that will help you navigate your new institution's culture? A first priority is to find the professional communities that will provide you with ongoing support and wisdom. As the lone library director at your institution, it will be invaluable for you to develop a network of similarly placed professionals to help you navigate through your environment. Professional development experiences, such as workshops on leadership techniques, team building, and problem resolution will also be helpful. While these strategies can provide you with a mentor outside the institution who understands your position and responsibilities, it is critical to also find at least one mentor within the institution who understands its culture and politics. Your local mentor will help you get to know the institution, but there are other strategies that can also further your understanding and help you build a deeper political awareness that will serve you in your role as director.

Identify and connect with your peer colleagues across the institution. You may be part of a formal group such as a dean's council that meets regularly. If not, with careful deliberation seek out those at your level who have great respect on campus.

Build partnerships and develop alliances with administrative departments. There may be obvious partners such as student support services, the writing center, and IT, but be wary that your overtures to any particular partner do not create turf wars.

Cultivate strong relationships with the academic program. Developing relationships with key faculty is critically important, but you should not overlook opportunities to forge connections with the administrative assistants in academic departments. They provide a different but very necessary perspective on their faculty and the priority issues for their departments.

Don't forget your primary clientele, the students. It may be helpful to form a student advisory group if one doesn't already exist. Talk to your student workers; learn from them what they and their peers think about the library.

Cultivate informal chains of communication; capitalize on informal networks. While the strategies previously mentioned focus on formal relationships, you often have the opportunity to develop informal relationships with faculty, staff, and administrators through outside activities. Do you know who is in your bike group or yoga class?

Ensure a good level of visibility on campus; become part of the campus community. While work/life balance is necessary, the director should try to attend major campus events, as well as departmental events such as lectures and performances. This doesn't need to be burdensome; find those activities that align with your personal interest, whether they are music, dance, art, politics, or the environment.

Keep up with institutional politics, including the rumor mill; various campus constituencies have differing issues. Read the student newspaper and social media sites regularly to find out hot-button topics for the students. Read faculty blogs; you might even "friend" some faculty on Facebook. Hang out at the coffee bar; see who's having lunch and join them. The talk will inevitably turn to campus concerns.

Learn what the tone is and adapt your style; calibrate your behavior to what's effective in the institutional culture. Be judicious and restrained; or be the squeaky wheel. Particularly as a new director trying to introduce change, you will find more success and less frustration if you both know the local process and acknowledge the campus culture in your approach. Some institutions are more entrepreneurial and seek out change agents; others may be more conservative and rest heavily on traditions.

Within the library, the director has a great deal of power and influence; you need to be cognizant of the impact of even your most casual comments on the staff, particularly as they are learning your style. Depending on the style of the previous director, staff may be more comfortable with "taking direction" than with a more participatory management approach. If you seek the "wisdom of the crowd" in your own management style, you need to be completely up-front with your expectations of the staff. Let staff know that it is okay to disagree; actively model dissent.

Capitalize on your honeymoon period; go for the big wins; ask the naive questions. Although people will be watching you closely and, frankly, judging you, this is probably the one time you will be granted leniency for mistakes you are likely to make. Understand that no matter how long you are with an institution, you will continue to make mistakes and misread situations. A great director knows how to recoup from her losses and move on.

NOTES

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