

# **An Emerging Framework for Engagement, Innovation and Leadership**

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## **Abstract**

This paper draws on the decade-long strategic and organizational change experience of a large Canadian research library to address the conference theme of 'Engage, Create and Lead'. This paper overviews an emerging framework for sustained and successful innovation for the realization of organizational culture change. The framework under development has three interrelated elements at its core: engagement, leadership and innovation. While the presentation will have a focus on academic librarianship in the context of the global post-secondary sector, this emerging framework for engagement, leadership and innovation to effect organizational culture change offers wide applicability for all types of libraries.

## **Introduction**

Organizational change is something that is occurring in many libraries world-wide. However, not always is that change undertaken in a comprehensive, systemic and planned way. All too often, affecting change to an organization's culture is not seen as a critical success factor in achieving positive and successful organizational change.

A decade of professional practice experience at a major Canadian research library provides the background and context for this paper, which reports on work-in-progress to document a comprehensive and integrated framework for managing and effecting organizational cultural change. The University Library (the library) at the University of Saskatchewan (UofS) provides the context for the framework, which has the potential to be a blueprint that others charged with implementing organizational cultural change may find useful.

The UofS, located in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and founded in 1907, is one of Canada's leading medical-doctoral universities and is internationally recognized for its contributions to teaching, scholarship, research, and innovation. The campus is home to two internationally renowned research facilities, the Canadian Light Source synchrotron and the Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organization (VIDO). Signature research areas (water security, food and bioproducts, One Health, energy and mineral resources, Aboriginal peoples scholarship, and synchrotron sciences) positions the UofS, a member of the U15 group of universities, among the most distinguished universities in Canada and in the world.

The institution's library currently serves a client base of over 22,000 students and 5,000 faculty and staff through seven physical campus locations and extensive e-resources. Library holdings include unique and special

collections relating to Saskatchewan, Western Canada, and the University of Saskatchewan. While not alone in its journey of transformation of collections, facilities and services, the library can be considered a leader in its achievement of a significant transformation of its organizational culture.

### **Transforming an Organizational Culture: An Emerging Framework**

An organization's culture solidifies over time, as organizational members preserve and evolve the history, rules and norms of the organization. Each and every organization has its own unique culture, created over time through the shared attitudes, values, beliefs, perceptions, and customs of organizational members (Walter 1985, 301). Cultures prevail throughout an organization and a significant and sustained change to a culture takes time, dedicated focus, and planning in order to change.

The role of the library leader in implementing successful cultural change is critical. There are times when a leader recognizes that the prevailing culture will not adequately support (or may be detrimental to) the achievement of the organization's vision and hence a cultural shift is essential to achieve goals and the identified desired future state.

The transformation journey for the library began in 2005 with a decision by the university leadership to recruit a dean as leader and chief executive officer. This change highlighted to the campus and beyond the library's dual academic

and service mandate; and, positioned it as one of seventeen academic units represented at the senior leadership table.

Upon arrival in March 2006 the dean launched the library's concerted effort to transform its collections, services and facilities through the development of a new strategic plan. This plan, strongly aligned with the university's strategic directions, contained a new mission and vision as well as new organizational values. Employees from across the library system were involved in the creation of this new strategic plan, and therefore the vision for the future had strong library-wide support.

Integral to achieving the vision was "a strong desire to build a workplace culture that was characterized by high levels of employee engagement, with effective communication and leadership at all layers and levels of our library" (Williamson 2013, 135). Highly committed and engaged employees would be needed in order to reshape and refocus the library and its workforce, and new ways of thinking, behaving and leading would be essential. Significant change to the library's culture would be essential (Williamson 2013, 136).

The experience of the library over the period 2006 to 2016 highlights the value of utilizing a strategic framework for sustained culture change. The framework under development has three interrelated elements at its core: engagement, leadership and innovation.

## **Engaging organizational members**

The arrival of a new leader often signals change for employees. However, often there are times when existing leaders realize that a serious change of course is necessary. Regardless of the circumstances, it falls to leaders to inspire a shared vision by appealing to shared aspirations, providing awareness about why change is necessary, and involving others in the creation of a new future state. Doing this increases the likelihood that others will support the new future state, enlist their colleagues and other team members to share in the vision for the future, and work hard to support the achievement of that vision.

Through the library's strategic planning process, employees had the opportunity to participate in the creation of a new direction and vision for the library. They also had opportunities to participate in the monitoring and assessment of the library's progress on achieving its new strategic direction and goals, therefore sharing accountability for the success of the plan. Employees also had opportunities to engage together in the creation of operational plans for their branch/unit, aligned with the library's strategic plan. These operational plans helped employees understand how the contributions at the branch/unit level ultimately contributed to the library's achievement of its goals.

In 2005 prior to the arrival of the dean, an institutionally sponsored employee survey had found that only 54% of library employees were engaged.

This score was derived using the Q12, a highly researched method to measure employee engagement developed by the Gallup organization from over thirty years of accumulated quantitative and qualitative research (Gallup 2008, 10-11). The planning process led to the adoption by the library of a definition of engagement: those who *say* positive things about the organization, *strive* to do their best every day, and *stay* to learn and grow (AON Hewitt Consulting 2015, 1). Employee engagement became a focus within the library's framework for change.

The library needed to determine ways to substantially increase its level of employee engagement. One strategy was to identify employee engagement as a key performance indicator for the measurement of strategic plan success. This resulted in conversations about what factors drive engagement and the level of engagement that would be desired. By increasing understanding and awareness about employee engagement through discussions, it painted a picture and created desire amongst many to become more engaged. The employee survey also provided valuable information about how well employees were living the organization's values through decision-making and interactions with others.

Having baseline data on employee engagement and how well the organizational values were being demonstrated provided the library with an ability to measure progress in these areas from year to year. This data provided

great insight about areas requiring further focus, and validated that the various strategic people initiatives were indeed shifting the organizational culture.

In 2009, the development of a library People Plan (strategic human resources plan) signaled the pivotal importance of the workforce in the achievement of the library's vision and strategic directions. Like the development of the strategic plan, the People Plan was developed through the active involvement and engagement of library employees.

The People Plan highlighted the four most critical areas of emphasis for the workforce and these became the four core people strategies of: learn and develop, relationships and teamwork, appreciation and celebration, and conversation and communication. A futuristic 'people vision' for the workforce was developed, as were various key actions to advance the workforce towards the achievement of both its people vision and in turn, the broader library vision. Leadership development, upskilling to work with an increasingly electronic library collection, team building, appreciation and recognition activities, and enhanced communications were identified as key actions.

Finding ways to engage others is a critical step in attempting to shift culture. Engagement cannot be mandated, therefore it is up to leaders to determine how to spark engagement. This starts with understanding what

matters to employees, through listening and then taking steps to implement changes.

Engaging employees in determining what the workforce could look like in the future creates significant buy-in, energy, excitement, and commitment for that future vision. It can challenge employees to envision themselves as part of that future state, who then in turn inspire others to share in that vision.

It is unrealistic to expect that everyone will share the future vision. Every organization will have some portion of its workforce that is not engaged. Managing disengaged employees can be exhausting for leaders and frustrating for engaged employees who feel attacked or criticized for their good work and optimistic mindset. Leaders should not be distracted by the disengaged, but instead focus their energy on the actively engaged who are committed to moving the organization forward.

By remaining steadfast on the path towards progress and receiving energy and optimism from the engaged majority, leaders and engaged employees can together propel the organization forward towards its ideal future vision.

### **Cultivate leaders**

The leader alone cannot change an organization's culture. They must rely on leaders elsewhere throughout the organization to demonstrate and embody



behaviors that are aligned with and support the achievement of the desired culture.

Learning about leadership together can be a powerful driver of culture change. This was the reason why the library instituted a customized in-house learning and development approach to grow a sustainable culture of 'leadership from where you stand'. The Library Leadership Development Program – LLDP (Williamson 2013; Mierke 2014) is a critical component of this case study story.

The strategic decision in 2008 to invest in leadership development for all employees was one of the most impactful decisions that has directly contributed to the culture shift. Utilizing both internal and external organization development (OD) expertise, the LLDP was based on feedback from employee focus groups, which helped to identify and understand some of the key issues, and the LLDP curriculum was designed to build organizational capacity to address these issues. Core to the program is the philosophy that anyone can be a leader; one does not need to be in a formal managerial position in order to be a leader. Employees can (and should) lead from where they stand.

The program curriculum incorporates learning from the self, team and organizational perspectives and covers topics including relationship building, team building, leading change, planning and accountability, organizational culture, organizational effectiveness, and personal mastery. Behavioral science

instruments provide participants with greater insight into how their own personal leadership style intersects with their innate personality preferences. Trios are used for peer coaching, and action-learning elements of the program provide opportunities for teams to apply their leadership learning to real-life work situations.

Many graduates of the LLDP as well as non-graduates have engaged with various in-house leadership development activities including the leadership reading club, a leadership community of practice (CoP), and engagement with half and full day sessions offered as part of the sustaining leadership learning workshop series. All new library employees attend an orientation workshop aimed at introducing the 'lead from where you stand' philosophy, and encouragement is provided to develop leadership skills from the commencement of employment.

Through engaging in leadership development activities, employees have expanded their mindsets and now more easily embrace change. By becoming more aware of their own innate preferences and how those preferences surface within their personal leadership style, they have a greater awareness of the impact of their behavior on others. The development of a deeper understanding and appreciation for the styles and preferences of others has helped employees work more effectively together, resulting in more positive outcomes and work experiences. A 2014 employee survey highlighted that 68% of employees who

participated in leadership development activities reported an increase in their overall job satisfaction since their participation in the activities; survey participants also reported dramatic improvements in workplace communication and relationship skills as a result of the library's investment in leadership development (Polischuk 2014, 5).

The competencies and behaviors that were developed through the library's leadership development initiatives "...have changed the organization's culture to be more collaborative, flexible, open and accepting of change and challenge, supportive of learning, able to create and use knowledge, and focused on achieving the organization's vision and values....[t]hese are the characteristics commonly associated with a learning organization" (Crawley-Low 2013, 61). The process of building leadership capacity at all levels of the organization was a pivotal factor in transforming this library's culture. The cultural transformation at the library was accomplished in just four years, from the point in 2008 where the decision was made to invest in leadership development until 2012 when it was recognized that the culture was profoundly different (Mierke 2014, 73).

A strong investment in leadership development, if introduced in a way that engages others, can be a gateway to create a movement towards real sustained organizational culture change. Investing in the development of leaders is one of

the most powerful and impactful strategies that an organization can make; the benefits of doing so are infinite.

### **Foster innovation, creativity and risk-taking**

Creativity is defined as the ability to make something new, and innovation is defined as the act of taking creativity and making it concrete (Merriam-Webster). Innovation is, at its essence, the creation of something that is [perceived] to be new and different and that adds value (Dimick 2014, 5). Creativity is imaginative and often spontaneous, and requires the ability to take risks. Going beyond just being creative and innovative signifies maturity in the process of culture change.

The presence of a culture of engagement and leadership provides the foundation for an organization to foster a climate that embraces innovation, creativity and risk-taking. This is why the framework for culture change first requires a high level of engaged employees, followed by a high level of employees empowered to exercise leadership where they stand. Without engaged employees providing leadership all throughout the organization, it will be more difficult to foster and nurture a climate of innovation.

A foundational step in building a culture of creativity and innovation within an organization is to create a climate that is accepting of failure. "If failure is a

stigma, employees and leaders will not be willing to take the personal or professional risks required for innovation” (Estrin 2009, 110).

The library had been historically fairly risk-averse and resistant to change. However the 2006 vision envisaged employees as ‘leaders and innovators.’ This strategic imperative that employees would be both leaders and innovators caused different sorts of conversations to occur.

Conversations centered around what would be needed in order for employees to embrace creativity, and to learn from failure. There was a commitment made to becoming a learning organization, which Senge describes as a place “...where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together” (Senge 1990). A learning organization is one that tries something new, learns from what works and what doesn't, and continually readjusts and regroups as it learns.

There were conversations about employees being discovery learners, described as acquiring knowledge and skills using methods of inquiry. “Being a discovery learner is an attitude or an approach ... a way of being, and includes an ability and a comfort level to experiment with new software, investigate new

innovations, be self-taught (rather than waiting to be taught), take risks, research, and try new things” (Mierke 2016).

The LLDP and related leadership activities empowered employees to exercise leadership and to be creative and innovative in their work. Employees began to contribute new ideas in new ways. For example, the idea and motivation initially of one librarian to establish a research centre (the Centre for Evidence-Based Library and Information Practice: C-EBLIP) and the eventual approval of C-EBLIP as a university approved research centre within the library is a powerful instance of how creative ideas can be contributed in innovate ways to achieve new things. C-EBLIP’s continuing evolution shows true innovation, creativity and risk-taking.

## **Conclusion**

Mossop (2013) describes transformative change as a state that may be visualized from the outset, but is realized only in hindsight; there comes a point in time when comparing an organization’s former state to its current state that you realize that the current state is profoundly different. The library’s culture now is profoundly different than it was a decade ago. It has taken a substantial amount of vision, planning, commitment, engagement, leadership and perseverance to bring about this transformed culture. It has also taken courage on the part of organizational leaders to make tough decisions, to ensure that the right people are in the right positions to effect change. This has meant ensuring that those in

formal managerial and supervisory roles demonstrate strong leadership, and having the foresight and courage to remove those who are ineffective and/or disengaged.

A library-wide focus, commitment, and determination to shift the culture by developing leaders has greatly contributed to the creation of a new progressive culture. This new culture is characterized by: high levels of engaged employees (measured at 76% in 2015); employees who are guided by and consistently demonstrate the organization's values in their decision making and interactions with others (71% of employees in 2015 stated that organizational members are living the library's values); employees who feel empowered to exercise leadership where they stand and make decisions that support their work; there is greater appreciation for and focus on ensuring effective team functioning; employees routinely look to identify efficiencies to processes and solutions to problems; and change is embraced. Employees demonstrate courage, resilience, and optimism on a daily basis. There is increased accountability within the library; employees demonstrate personal accountability for their work outcomes and their personal behavior, and conversely also hold one another accountable. Communication and relationships are much stronger.

There are many challenges confronting libraries today. The ten-year change experience of one Canadian research library has provided the working context for an evolving framework, which in part has been reported and shared

through this paper. Work on documenting the framework continues as does the case study experiences of the library. The framework may be helpful to other library leaders in their efforts to successfully implement organizational change and evolve a culture that can sustain the library well into the future.



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