Strategic innovation: More than a myth?
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Innovation: Hype and Heresy

I think about innovation, a lot. It is an admitted obsession. I think it started because I grew up afraid of my own shadow, but once I gained confidence, I wanted to make up for lost time! Yes, it has taken me years to figure out who I am and what I want from my life. And so, yes, I can't then be surprised that libraries are taking as long as I have taken (if you think about the life of the library in Elisabeth years…). HOWEVER….I am ready to see libraries and librarians take an active stance. I am tired of hearing us debate our future in negative terms, rather than seizing on great ideas and acting on them. It sometimes feels like we are marching in place, rather than proactively moving forward. And this is happening as new professionals leave the field because their ideas are not heard, as existing librarians have their salaries frozen and their job duties increased as positions are frozen or eliminated.

I want us to admit to our successes. I often hear "fail cheaply" given as innovation advice at library conferences. Look, if there is one thing librarians do not need to hear it is advice on frugality! We are innately good at that. So, I exhort you instead to think about succeeding extravagantly. Shout your success from the rooftops! It may seem immodest, but really, if we can't brag about ourselves, who else will?

From my own research, I know that we have innovators in the profession. Librarians are more than capable of conceiving of new ideas that add value to their organizations and many librarians actually do act on those ideas. It then is not a matter of who is in the profession, but a matter of who is at the helm and how library employees are empowered and motivated to think innovatively and to act innovatively.

Organizational innovation

Organizations have personalities. You can tell when you visit libraries and talk to the staff how different one library can be from another. So what makes a library strategically innovative?

- An explicit definition for innovation
- An organizational recognition that innovation is both a culture and a goal
- A shared mission and strategic direction
- Willingness to spend resources on innovation
- Training and support for existing staff
- Hiring new employees who want to be part of an innovative culture and who have talent to contribute

Let me talk about why and how these organizational documents are important. When I have interviewed librarians and middle managers about their organizational documents, many are unsure if innovation is mentioned anywhere. More telling is that many are unsure if their library has a mission statement or a strategic plan. If an organization wants to be clear about its direction and wants to have

everyone work toward the strategic direction the leader has set, then that must be clearly and regularly communicated.

What does innovation mean at your organization? I have seen it mean anything "new" to anything that uses technology. For me, innovation is something new to your organization, including products, services, and processes, that adds value for your patron. The value piece is key. I have seen too many times when something is introduced in a library simply because another library has done it…and that idea maybe didn't add in value locally, but it starts to spread because some library directors seem desperate to illustrate they too can change.

The strategic planning process itself illustrates a library's personality and employees instinctively take away clues. A hierarchical and autocratic management structure is much less inclusive than a flat structure. If library management wants to believe that everyone in the library will be innovative and thinks that the managers will write and present a plan that says that…and then believe that they have created a culture of innovation, think again! Innovation in such an organization can exist, but it is much more likely to exist as pockets of innovation than as a library-wide pervasive culture of innovation.

Budget

Ideally, the organization's administration is willing to put its money where its mouth is by allocating funding for new ideas that support the strategic plan. Here's an idea for managers to try: let go of some control. Let everyone in the library present a plan for an idea and ask for funding for it. This is kind of like the business plan competitions you may see elsewhere on campus!

My tips:
- Reinforce positive behavior, even if the outcome is exactly what you personally wanted. Changing behavior takes time, so recognize the small steps that get us all there.
- Create opportunities. Find ways to give people a voice and ways to act on their ideas.
- Be intrepid.
- Look outside libraries for ideas. We can be too incestuous with ideas.
- Recognize when your idea is not the best and be willing to work to see someone else's vision come to fruition.
- No one wants to lead…but no one wants to follow. We must do both.
- Be willing to have tough conversations, so create a safe environment where everyone can be heretical.
- Innovating can be threatening. Be kind to each other.
- In my innovation utopia, managers check when and how they say no….and employees do the same.
- Find your joy. This one comes from my grandfather who told me this when I was a teenager. Joy doesn't come to you and chasing it is frustrating. Make finding joy a regular activity in your life.
- Breathe.

Why this long list? Because each part when added together creates a healthy whole, both organizationally and individually. We all are responsible for fertile soil, regardless of position in the library, age, gender, or years of experience. All ideas should be welcomed.   Every library should be able to avoid the hype of innovation and instead find their way into a strategically placed future that demonstrates the real value of their library.