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The Bottom Line

PEOPLE MAKE LIBRARIES

Determining and navigating institutional culture

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Abstract

Purpose – This column seeks to address library personnel issues. This particular installment discusses the challenges of determining an organization's culture and the culture of any parent or supporting organizations. It also discusses some strategies for navigating organizational culture.

Design/methodology/approach – The column is based on the author's substantial experience dealing with personnel matters in academic, public, and special libraries, including hiring for all types of positions. It is personal opinion, based on lengthy experience.

Findings – This article discusses the challenges inherent in learning about an organization's culture and the culture of any parent or supporting organizations. It also discusses a variety of strategies for navigating organizational culture, in order to foster success.

Originality/value – The column is intended to help people to deal with all types of personnel issues overall; this specific column is intended to help librarians deal with the challenges of determining the nature of an organization's culture, and of navigating this culture successfully.

Keywords: Organizational culture, Institutional culture, Personnel, Librarians, Employment

In the last two columns, we went through tips on applying for and interviewing for your first professional position. Now, let us assume you have landed the oft-elusive prize – a professional position. What next? Well, you will of course want to be successful in this new position. You cannot control everything that might influence your success, but one thing you can do is try to ease your transition to a new environment. One of the major factors in anyone's success in a new professional position will be how well you are able to fit into the environment. This is not to say that you should not be your own person – not at all – or that you should not speak up and try to change things when you think this is important. But determining and understanding the institutional or organizational culture, so that you are able to operate smoothly within it rather than finding yourself at constant loggerheads with others, is important. The institutional culture will have a big effect on both your day-to-day work, and on how receptive people are to your efforts to take on any management or project management responsibilities in the future. So, how do you figure out the nature of the institutional culture in your new position?

First, do a little background research. Is the environment unionized, or non-unionized? If the environment is unionized, is the union very active or strong, and how does it interact with the rank and file members? Do you only hear from the union when there are contract negotiations, or are they heavily involved in institutional

decision-making? If the environment is non-unionized, is there a faculty association (for academic libraries) or some other form of association to represent employees in case of grievances? If so, is it a voluntary association, or is it mandatory? How involved is it with day-to-day decision-making or with decision-making for major policies? Also, how well-defined and detailed are the position descriptions within your new organization? Do they carefully lay out almost all possible responsibilities, or are they relatively broad, allowing for a certain flexibility, with all the good and bad things that may imply? If everything is carefully laid out, you may be entering an environment where responsibilities are fairly strictly defined, and, at least until you have been there a while and get a sense of things, you may wish to be careful to stay within those boundaries and not tread on toes. After you have gotten a better sense of the work environment, you will know how far you can go.

You will also want to try to do a little research on the existing employees. Have they largely been working in this place for several years? Or is there considerable turnover? If they have been working there for some time, have they had opportunities to grow, either by taking on new or different responsibilities, or through professional development. As well, what sort of support is there for professional development? Does the administration welcome it, and allow paid time out of the office to take courses or attend seminars? Or is it difficult to get permission for professional development? You will also want to do all the advance research you can on the specific structure of the work environment. For example, a small library in a law firm will have a very different structure within the larger organizational hierarchy than that of a branch of a large public library system, and an academic library will have a different structure again. There are huge variances in the types of structures in which libraries operate – I do not believe I have ever seen two systems that work in quite the same fashion. Using our previous examples, let us outline some sample structures. If you are a librarian within a small library in a law firm, you may be either a solo librarian or one of a relatively small number of employees. You will likely have a very broad range of responsibilities, ranging from cataloging to reference and everything in between. You may be responsible for actually doing research and delivering complete research reports (unlike an academic library, where you are expected to teach people to find information on their own). You will likely report either to a senior librarian or to a designated non-librarian within the firm. If the latter, be prepared to explain library needs in somewhat greater detail than you might need to do if you were a junior librarian in a large academic library. The lawyers may well not be familiar with library resources or needs, and you may find yourself having to explain and justify things like OCLC service.

If you are a librarian within a branch of a large public system, you will likely report to a senior manager, who may or may not be a librarian, depending on the organization. Overall, the chief librarian may report directly to a Board of Trustees, and the Board may be culled from the general citizenry, city council, politicians, and others who are not trained librarians. In this case, your library's budget may be one of many municipal expenses, and will be competing with other services for limited funds, and will often need to make presentations to City Council. When measured against the need for garbage pick-up, police, and fire department services, libraries often have difficulty getting all the funding they need in bad economic times – when usage of

public libraries is often at an all-time high. How supportive has this board been in the past? Do they truly value libraries, or do they see them as a luxury?

If you are a librarian within a large academic library, you will be highly likely to be reporting to a more senior librarian in a management position. Your chief librarian will usually report to a senior vice-president of some kind within the larger college structure. Most frequently, the chief librarian reports to the Vice-President of Academic Affairs or Provost (titles vary). Sometimes the chief librarian may report to a Vice-President of Administration. Sometimes reporting lines can reveal things about how the senior administration views the library's role – as a full academic department, as an essential service for faculty and students, etc. In academic libraries, there is also the question of the status of librarians. Are they full faculty, with all the attendant rights and responsibilities of other faculty? Or are they academic staff? If they are faculty, what is the tenure process like? Who sits on tenure committees? If they are academic staff, is there an opportunity to eventually get some sort of certificate of continued employment? Tenure or certificates of continued employment can lead to a certain feeling of stability, which could affect the work environment. You may also wish to find out how librarians relate to faculty or department heads from other disciplines. Are they treated as equals, partners? Or as service providers? Or something else?

Is there also a larger organizational structure within which the library must operate? For example, at the City University of New York, the nearly two dozen colleges operate with considerable independence. Each has its own President and Provost and other senior administration, and its own Board. Each is structured slightly differently. Each has its own tenure process and academic policies. This is important, as it would be exceedingly difficult to have every single college under the exact same policies – there are too many differences between them. We have two year colleges, four year colleges, a Graduate Center, and specialized schools such as the CUNY School of Journalism. Each has different administrative needs. But they must all also work within CUNY, and CUNY has a Chancellor and Board of Trustees. They share many things, including an integrated library system, licensing of many databases, and more. There is a Dean of Libraries for CUNY, but the individual colleges all have their own Chief Librarian, reporting to a Provost, and they do not report to the CUNY Dean of Libraries, though there is considerable collaboration. We also have a Council of Chief Librarians, consisting of the heads of all the CUNY libraries, the Dean of Libraries, the CUNY head of Library Systems, and the CUNY licensing negotiator. There are CUNY-wide committees for things like circulation, interlibrary loan, systems, public services, and more. Every library has considerable freedom to do its own projects, but there is also a lot of collaboration and co-operation. This leads to a general atmosphere of willingness to collaborate and work together across the system.

Still considering academic libraries, another question you should ask concerns librarian involvement across the organizational structure. Are librarians welcomed (or required) as participants in committees that cross departmental or administrative boundaries? If they are faculty, they may well be involved in committees performing such foundational academic tasks as overseeing the curriculum, dealing with academic integrity, and addressing grievances. Also, how involved are librarians (or is the library) in any kind of departmental or college accreditation?

Are you in a publicly funded institution, or a private institution? Private institutions have very strong control over the way they run themselves, so long as they operate within the law. Publicly funded institutions often have some caveats, conditions, or legislative restrictions. At CUNY (which is publicly funded), for example, we cannot set our own tuitions, must deal with things like state contracts for purchasing, etc. All of this can affect the library atmosphere – as well as the amount of red tape you have to go through for various functions. This may also affect the library’s flexibility, and ability to jump into certain new projects or initiatives.

No matter what kind of library you are in, in these times, you will also want to try to learn how relations are with the people responsible for IT. Are relations relatively smooth and collegial, or contentious? Does the library perhaps even have its own systems people, or even manage IT for the entire organization? Can you get changes made to the library website in a timely manner, or does it take months and require levels of approval? IT is critical to today’s libraries, and the library’s relationship with those who provide technology services can have a major impact on the atmosphere and morale within the library.

Often, there is no single culture within an organization – especially if you are in a multi-layered institution. At Brooklyn College, I must consider the culture of the library, of the College, of CUNY as a whole, and of various groups within each of these, when deciding how to handle various issues. Sometimes the aims, mission, vision, and objectives of any two units may be somewhat different from each other; in such cases, if you are proposing a new project, you will need to make arguments as to how your particular project will benefit all parties.

Finally, you will also want to look at external conditions and stressors. Right now, we are in a very difficult economic situation, with a major drop in state revenues. Every unit is tightening its belt. We have a hiring freeze, though mercifully no furloughs or layoffs. An early retirement initiative led to the departure of many of our senior faculty, including library faculty, and we have lost some institutional memory as a result. We are also short-staffed, as no one has yet been told whether they can replace any of the retirees. We have cut back on several services, but are still trying to cover most of the needs of our faculty, staff, and students. This places a certain degree of stress on existing faculty and staff, and I have had to keep a careful eye on the situation, to guard against employee burnout. However, in our library, there is a very strong “can do” culture of collaboration, and many units have shared the costs of hiring some adjunct librarians to alleviate the worst of the short-staffing. In some libraries in which I have worked, such a collaborative culture did not exist, and if a unit was short-staffed, others did not volunteer assistance. This is an academic example, but funding issues affect all libraries. Special libraries can be slashed or closed. Public libraries may reduce hours or close branches, or in some cases close altogether. Budget issues are a definite stressor. But how each library attempts to deal with these issues can tell you a lot about the working environment.

But wait – now you may be asking “How on earth am I supposed to find any of this information?” You may not be able to find all of the answers to every question you may have, but there are ways to learn a great deal about an environment even before you set foot in it. First and most important, talk to colleagues in the profession. The library world is surprisingly small – chances are that if you look, you can find someone who

knows someone who knows someone who knows something about that library. Do not take every word as gospel, of course – individual opinions may be shaded in various ways, especially if the person had a poor experience. But talk to as many people as you can find who know something about your particular library or library system. Check the library website, and the website of any parent organization, for information such as annual reports, newsletters, accreditation reports, etc. If you can find earlier versions of the organization’s website on the internet archive, this may be another source of information. For public libraries, the council or board minutes are often public documents, and either posted online or available at a specific location for perusal. For publicly funded colleges and universities, there are also many documents that are required by law to be available to the public. Information on the broader organizational structure will not tell you how the staff or faculty at a particular institution get along with each other, but it can certainly give you a sense of some factors that will definitely affect the environment.

Once you have learned as much as you can, you are ready to start work – and then you will see the organizational culture(s) first-hand. A few words of advice, as you begin any new position – spend a lot of time listening and a lot of time asking questions. Do not be shy about asking your colleagues or boss anything that you think will help you in your job; you are better off asking what may feel at the time like a silly question, than you are if you do not ask, and somehow make a gaffe. Watch your colleagues; shadow them if this is permitted. Listen to people – patrons, colleagues, administrators, everyone. Be willing to join a few committees or assist with specific initiatives, to get a better sense of operations, but do not volunteer for absolutely everything, or you will over-commit and burn out quickly. Ask your boss how much of this sort of service is usual. Be willing to help colleagues: if someone has to go home sick, volunteer to pitch in with others to cover shifts. Do not take everything on yourself, or let yourself be taken advantage of, but do carry a fair share of the load. If everyone pulls together, you have a much better chance of surviving even the most difficult times with morale more or less intact. In meetings, do not be afraid to express your own thoughts and ideas, but listen to those of colleagues carefully, and never try to steamroll others. You may have terrific new ideas, but in some environments, there may be structural or administrative reasons why they cannot be implemented easily, or there may be reasons why they are actually inappropriate for the environment. This is something you will learn over time, and by asking questions. Make the effort to learn all you can, both in advance and as you begin working, and your chances of having a successful and rewarding work experience will be improved.

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