Innovation and Strategy: Risk and Choice in Shaping User-Centered Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Creating services that add value for the customer takes precedence over all other drivers in determining organizational success in the twenty-first century. Libraries uniquely capable of anticipating and meeting customer needs in ways that mirror a changing world are the libraries that are deemed successful and, therefore, are able to attract resources and talent. It is evident from current environmental indicators that organizations need to utilize two tools skillfully in order to create customer value: innovation and strategy. While strategy can exist without innovation, it is unlikely that effective innovation can occur without the use of strategy. For organization leaders the challenge is threefold: develop the ability to create value-added innovative services on a continuous basis; utilize strategy to make decisions about innovations; and deliver innovative services to the customer. This article will review recent theories of innovation and strategy and place them in the context of the work of nonprofit organizations (such as most libraries). Suggested approaches to creating innovation and effective strategy will also be reviewed.

STRATEGY AND INNOVATION: BUILDING A TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY KNOWLEDGE PRACTICE

“Different is not always better but better is always different.” (Luce, 2003)

There is nothing new about the need for organizations to be creative in problem solving, to be customer oriented, or to be strategic. When pointed...
to in many professional and trade presses as well as by the media in general, however, the need for organizational innovation and strategic thinking is rarely defined and put in specific context. This article will explore the nature of innovation, particularly in the public sector, and will look at the role that strategic thinking plays in fostering and promoting innovation. These issues will be placed in the context of organizational development in libraries.

**What Is Innovation?**

At face value an invention is something that strikes most of us as ephemeral and sometimes foolhardy—things seen on late-night television advertisements. Yet, we all know and use the many inventions that have changed modern life in the past century: telephones, dishwashers, computers, automatic teller machines (ATMs), and so on. These are innovations—things that change the way we can do what we want to do; they have added value to our daily lives. In many cases what was once an innovation is now taken for granted. Remarkable inventions, once assimilated into daily life, become routine, an imperceptible part of our lives. Interestingly, however, once assimilated an innovation can be eclipsed and even made obsolete by a new innovation. Examples such as cell phones, music on compact discs, and computers indicate that something new can be created on the basis of older innovations.

In the public sector innovation often relates to services rather than products. Creative new services and processes that make a difference to customers are where the prospects for innovation lie. Potential innovation in this area is less obvious than in the area of three-dimensional products, but innovative services can have the power to keep existing customers and attract new customers.

For innovation to occur libraries must tap the creative potential of their staffs, vendors, and customers. While very much related, creativity and innovation are distinct from one another in important ways. Creativity is the act of generating new ideas and new perspectives. Innovation, on the other hand, occurs when creativity is applied and a product or service results. Creativity (including creative thinking skills), then, is certainly critical to the practice of innovation. Thus, creativity is a means and innovation is an end.

Leonard and Swap define innovation as “the embodiment, combination, and/or synthesis of knowledge in novel, relevant, valued new products, processes, or services” (Leonard & Swap, 1999, p. 7).

Creativity is a process of developing and expressing novel ideas that are likely to be useful. This definition assumes the use of specific tools and skills in order to develop these novel ideas. Innovation implies a buyer or target audience for these new products, processes, or services. In much of the literature on innovation, booming profit margins and focused competition are implied in the commercial sphere. How do libraries, as nonprofit
organizations, create innovation when they do not have profit margins to watch, or when they do not wish to compete in the same fashion as many corporate sector enterprises do?

Library literature points to innovations in organizational structure and performance. Yet these do not, in and of themselves, create added value for the user. For instance, the powerful approach taken at the University of Arizona (to name just one library) in restructuring how they approach work is, in and of itself, not an innovation that adds value for the customer. The innovative services made possible by the new organizational team-based model, however, are what could be pointed to as true innovation—that is, new, desired, or needed services that add value for university faculty, students, and other scholars. Improving our internal methods and practices indirectly, or perhaps not at all, has an impact on how the end user does what he or she needs to do. Innovation is more significantly about what our target audience can do—about the increased capacity of library users to do what they want and need to do in the way that most benefits their productivity, pleasure, and excellence.

In his unique book Sustaining Innovation, Paul Light describes the critical difference between innovation in the private sector and innovation in the public sector:

Whereas in the private sector an innovation merely needs to be profitable to be worth doing, in the public sector innovation must be about doing something worthwhile. . . . Second, public sector innovation involves more than simply doing the public’s business well. . . . Third, non-profit and government innovation involves the broader public good. The ultimate purpose of innovation is not to win awards, boost public confidence, or attract foundation support, but to create public value. (Light, 1998, p. xv, emphasis in the original)

Hence, rather than being defined as something “new to us,” innovation in the public sector must be about facilitating the work of our primary constituents in ways that are new and useful to them. It does not matter how innovative libraries are in creating their organizations if they do not produce innovative services, processes, and products for their clientele—library users.

HOW DO PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS INNOVATE?

Light studied a number of nonprofit and government organizations in a research project designed to understand how these organizations innovated “naturally”—meaning innovation was part of the organization’s culture and occurred on a consistent and continuous basis. Interestingly not all the organizations he studied understood the need for innovation when initially confronting problems and obstacles. The organizations that were handicapped at the outset learned how to innovate precisely because of the difficulties in which they found themselves. The organizations Light
studied (from the most resource-challenged to the resource-rich) had four principles in common that allow them to consistently innovate:

1. a commitment to controlling their environments rather than the other way around
2. an internal structure that creates the freedom to imagine
3. leadership that prepares the organization to innovate
4. management systems that serve the mission of the organization rather than the other way around

Light describes these principles as internal strategies for innovation. Externally, these principles must be translated into ideas, actions, and increased direct value that resonate with the constituents for whom the innovations are created. It is not sufficient to create organizational principles that describe an innovation culture without the subsequent creation of innovative products, processes, and services.

**Political Implications of Innovation**

Few would argue with the merits of continuous innovation and innovation that stems from organizational mission. Why, then, do some innovations simply fall flat? Why is it that the best of intentions do not suffice to engage the individuals for whom the innovation was created? Organizations can innovate wildly but be thoroughly unsuccessful in getting the attention of the client. Why does this happen? Grudin, author of *The Grace of Great Things* (1990), a book about innovation and creativity, argues that sensitivity to the politics of innovation as well as the current social context are crucial to the success of any innovation. The political aspects of life are set in the matrix of social interactions. It stands to reason, then, that the political and social climates are closely tied and that they must be considered as interrelated and interdependent factors.

The social climate surrounding an innovation has much to do with how it is perceived. And perception has much to do with the success or lack thereof of any innovation or innovative service. Thus, it is important to have a political (in the neutral sense of the word) acumen in order to be successful at innovation. A primary political arena for reflection is that of readiness: it matters a great deal whether or not a public is ready for the innovation. Grudin (1990) cites the famous example of the Dutch inventor Cornelis Drebbel. In 1624 Cornelis Drebbel proposed to the Prince of Wales that he be given £20,000 to create a solar power device on the hills outside London that would create heating power for all of London. He was summarily dismissed as being a crackpot interested in bizarre creations that serve no one. Grudin uses this example to describe how critical the politics of innovation are to the acceptance and survival of an invention/innovation. Drebbel’s invention was ahead of its time—that is, not politically and socially attuned—and was not easily perceived as possible or desirable by
the general public and the potential funding sources of the project. Drebbel ended up largely forgotten and penniless, although he actually had created numerous useful inventions that were adopted. His largest innovation or invention—the solar power scheme—placed him squarely in opposition to current socially acceptable thought. Using this example, Grudin points to the two-way interaction between innovator and society. Without social acceptance, an innovation is but a fancy.

Even our historical picture of successful ideas is somewhat clouded. When we look at triumphant innovations of the past, we see them, so to speak, from their own future: we confront them as *faits accomplis*, hardened into the sedate structure of our own cultural background. . . . Our blindness to these subjects, coupled with our historical neglect of valid innovations that failed, helps build the illusion . . . that innovation is easy, that . . . progress is automatic. (Grudin, 1990, p. 142)

The ability of an organization to detect how ready customers are for a particular innovation is related to its ability to interpret what the customer needs and wants—and, as importantly, what the social and political climate is—at any given moment. Additionally, creating effective messages about the innovation for the intended customers is an integral aspect of the innovation itself.

For nonprofit organizations, where the mission is intensely reliant on relationships with customers, the concepts of customer readiness and effective message conveyance are even more critical. These customers are likely to be accustomed to current practices and unable to see the very good reasons or benefits to change. The introduction of user-powered terminals for book charge out (self-checkout terminals) by libraries is an excellent example of an innovation where the message about what it was, what benefits (value) it brought the user, and why it existed was poorly conveyed. It is also a good example of the failure to match the introduction of a new service with the customer’s readiness to adopt new behaviors. In the early 1980s when this innovation was being introduced in many public libraries in the United States, this new service resulted in longer lines rather than the intended shorter ones, more technological hurdles for the customer to manage and learn, technological glitches that required work-arounds (such as large format materials that could not be handled by the equipment), and other such impediments to self-checkout being embraced by the very customers it was meant to please (DeJoice and Pongracz, 2000, pp. 5–8). Societally, this service came before the public was ready to “do the work themselves”—before the age of self-service. This age we now take for granted. It is marked by increasing numbers of services being provided where the customer actually does the “labor” him or herself and where the benefits are described as timesaving or comfort producing. Examples of this abound. Supermarket self-checkout, banking, and airline check-in, for instance, are services in which customers are greatly involved in performing
the service themselves, and these are heralded as having some value to us. Typically this value has to do with the time saved or convenience, such as the location where the service can be accessed. Libraries could have managed the aforementioned self-checkout innovation by engaging with the vendors in the design of the equipment as well as by observing customer behavior and then mapping their processes to the behavior rather than vice-versa. It may be that in the early 1980s when this innovation was first introduced, customers were not ready to view themselves in a self-service mode.

Patterns of customer behavior are dynamic guides to innovation potential. The practice of observing customers’ information-seeking behaviors, for instance, is likely to yield information about where an innovation might really have value—thus increasing the likelihood that customers will embrace the innovation.

Clearly, political context and societal readiness matter if innovation is to be accepted and utilized. Equally important, and part of the politics of innovation, is how the innovation is introduced. The tension between innovation and the status quo is such that innovation is often seen as disruption. In fact, Lawrence Lynn Jr. once defined innovation as “an original disruptive act” (quoted in Light, 1998, p. xv). How disruption is conveyed and what the disruption actually signifies in terms of a better experience for the customer will create the success or lack thereof of any innovation. There is an inevitable push-pull aspect to the introduction of any change. People (and organizations) tend toward stasis and the comfort of the known. Hence, regardless of its value an innovation may be seen as highly disruptive. Libraries that communicate well with the customer will be able to manage the political and social elements of the change being introduced. Perhaps more importantly, libraries that are able to manage the relationship they have with the customer in an effective way will be better able to help that customer weather the disruption that the introduction of innovation produces.

In order to manage the relationship as well as the communication with customers, libraries should understand the elements that are being disrupted by the innovation and those that are not. Often a change or disruption is seen as a sweeping event rather than something that alters some things while leaving others as they are. William Bridges, noted authority on the subject of change management, has said that the management of change is about two things: managing events and managing emotions about those events. Bridges states that it is as important to describe what is not changing as it is to describe what is changing (Bridges, 1991).

**Barriers to Innovation**

Most organizations aspire to both create change and be innovative. During consulting trips to many organizations across the United States
and Canada, I have heard the senior leaders and staff of research libraries describe in both verbal and written form the desire to be innovative, and yet these organizations often freely describe the frustration of not achieving innovation at the level or volume they desire. What barriers prevent libraries from pursuing innovation on a natural and routine basis?

One significant factor relates to the mature nature of most library organizations. They are not start-up organizations, nor are they struggling to establish themselves. Mature or aging organizations generally have a much more difficult time taking risks, experimenting, and creating innovation. Studies by Kim Cameron and Robert Quinn point to the changes an organization experiences as it ages. What is prized in a mature organization is not what is prized in a younger or developing organization (Cameron & Quinn, 1998).

Mature organizations, by their very nature, seek to ensure continued stability and success through reliance on practices that have worked in the past. In addition, more mature organizations have built up deep cultures. There is a perception amongst many of these organizations that there is a great deal to be lost individually and collectively by engaging in practices with the potential to attract the attention of constituents and parent organizations. One director explained to me that he wished his organization would take risks and create new services—as long as it did not end up in a less than flattering story on the front page of the local newspaper!

A young organization—one that is still in a formative stage, establishing its raison d’être, clarifying its values, and describing its clientele—may have more to lose in the short term, yet it is likely to take more risks, experiment a good deal, play fast and loose with ideas, and worry much less about organizational structure, policies, and rules. Because of these organizational culture elements, there is a likelihood that more innovation will occur more quickly in a younger organization simply due to the pressure to form an identity and a service and capture a piece of the customer’s attention. There is an improvisational aspect to the younger organization that the older organization does not have. The disadvantage for the younger organization is largely its lack of resources and a proven track record. A good example of the younger organization’s approach was seen in the early days of Apple Computer. The founders felt a passion for their innovations and products, were looking for their client base, were not interested in building policy, and were willing to take risks that the more mature IBM organization would have thought foolhardy or that would have been prevented outright by the company’s policies and procedures. Apple’s youthful flexibility allowed the company to create in what is reported to be a fluid and constant way. IBM, meanwhile, took a very measured approach to the production of a new product.

Libraries, as a whole, tend to be mature organizations, and thus they have developed an ability to consistently replicate what they have been good
at doing in the past. This proves to be an immense hurdle to organizations seeking to become innovative. The leaders of some mature organizations have stated to me that their innovations occurred “in spite” of their organizations. Such radical statements point to the ability of human imagination, ingenuity, and sheer passion to overcome existing structural and cultural limitations.

Additionally, specific barriers to the practice of innovation have been pointed to by researchers such as Moss Kanter (2002) and Ulrich (2002): organizational stability, standards, expertise, performance-oriented cultures, and an adherence to certainty. While normally thought of as beneficial characteristics, these play out in less than helpful ways when it comes to creating a climate conducive to innovation. When viewing barriers to innovation in action there is a clear tension between an accepted beneficial practice—typically that which is known—and another desirable practice more likely to lead to innovation. The result is a set of dichotomies that are extremely interesting from an organizational development perspective. I now turn to the examination of five dichotomies.

_Stability vs. Disturbance_

As stated above, most libraries are not young organizations. Their maturity means that they have reached a level of stability not easily shaken. Bureaucracies, policies, and procedures have essentially codified the library’s practices. To create innovation, however, an organization must be able both to respond to, and to self-induce, disturbance—even turbulence (Gryskiewicz, 1999). Innovation is born of new ideas, and often new ideas are seen as a disturbance to the accepted practice, the norm, or the tools of the successful past. For most people, disturbance does not typically correlate to effectiveness. As already mentioned above, much in a mature culture pushes against creating purposeful disturbance. Without disturbance to alter perspectives, mental models, and successful practices, innovation is unlikely to occur. Even a library’s long-held values—such as consistency, stability, and planning—that allow it to feel and behave confidently in relation to its mission are, in fact, often in opposition to the values underlying disturbance, which have to do with the positive sides of change and the energy afforded by disruption (Cameron & Quinn, 1998).

_Standards vs. Unknown Consequences or Patterns_

Libraries have succeeded in organizing information largely due to the creation of highly effective standards of practice and methods of managing knowledge and information. These standards can stand in the way of innovation simply by their very existence. Having created a successful “way of doing things,” library organizations may find it is much more difficult to imagine other ways of doing things even when environments change dramatically. A case in point is the relatively slow response in libraries to the appearance of metadata, the tagging of elements within text in order
to be able to search more deeply for information and correlations. Rather than leading the information field in the innovative use of metadata, libraries find themselves playing a catch-up game in order to use this tool. Consistently relied upon and successful ways of doing things stood in the way of recognizing and capitalizing on an opportunity for innovation.

**Expertise vs. Play**

Professions are expert based. Librarians spend considerable amounts of time becoming competent as professionals, and libraries prize this expertise above all other characteristics when hiring and developing professional staff. Yet this very competence may present a barrier to innovation. Why? Experts are, by and large, most uncomfortable with being inexpert or unknowledgeable (Argyris, 1986; see also Argyris, 1991). In addition to this, experts consider themselves “serious” people and so are less likely to engage in “play” as a way of exploring serious subject matter. Because it taps our creative intelligence, play is critical to innovation. The creative act cannot occur without a good deal of play and experimentation (Goleman, Kaufman, & Ray, 1992). Additionally, organizational cultures of mature organizations are likely to value play in the workplace much less than do younger organizations. Eisenhardt describes the need for groups to develop collective intuition and points to play as a significant factor in a group’s ability to develop this intuition: “These players, for example, develop their so-called intuition through experience. Through frequent play, they gain the ability to recognize and process information in patterns and blocks that form the basis of intuition. This patterned processing (what we term ‘intuition’) is faster and more accurate than processing single pieces of information” (Eisenhardt, 2001, p. 90).

**Performance vs. Practice**

Because they are expert based and service oriented, libraries develop “performance oriented” cultures unlikely to be amenable to “practicing” in real time with real customers. This essentially means that libraries have no practice fields. Practice fields allow individuals and groups to learn in a simulated, or safe, environment or in a real environment with the support of seasoned professionals as coaches and teachers. Even in the highly risky expert-based medical profession, the concept of practice fields—consider internships and residencies in teaching hospitals—is an honored and important one. In libraries, however, putting into play an experimental practice for a short time in order to learn is not common.

**Certainty vs. Risk**

The final and, in some ways, the most difficult dichotomy is that of certainty versus risk. As an organization develops stability, certainty and consistent replicability of experience is prized above risk and uncertainty. In addition, mixed messages regarding the safety of engaging in risk-re-
lated activities permeate many organizational cultures. Telling people to feel free to take risks, experiment, and make mistakes and then creating policies and procedures that purvey an opposite message creates an often unintended "fear of risk" climate. This unfortunate mixed message is not only a fundamental barrier to innovation; it can also create anxiety in an organization that draws energy away from creative and innovative work.

While the dichotomies described above indicate why it is difficult to create a culture of innovation, they by no means entirely prevent it. Innovations do come forth under even the most conflicted situations, and they succeed because of a leader's or a group's ability to think strategically and to know and understand the world of strategy.

**Strategy and Innovation: A Symbiotic Relationship**

Innovation without the development of strategy leads to unimplementable innovations, innovations that are misunderstood by the customers, or innovations that are ill-timed and insensitive to the milieu in which the customer lives. If innovation is about creating public value and customer success, strategy creation is about information gathering in relation to the environment (trend information, customer pattern information, customer need and readiness information, etc.). It is about assessing the political landscape and choosing where to put energy and effort (resources). Most importantly, it is about the generation of a multiplicity of perspectives; in effect, strategy creation is about deciding how, when, and where to innovate and for whom.

Organizations that create strategic plans that build on the past are not engaged in strategy creation; they are engaged in writing plans to describe short-term aspirations and possibly only describing tactics related to what has been, what is, and what will be in internally focused ways. Instead, the practice of strategy creation must tap collective intuition, creativity, and knowledge to develop the "new" at precisely the right moment.

This requires much more finesse and skill than agreeing on a number of goals and objectives for the next two years. Gary Hamel, strategy innovation guru, states that "The essential problem in organizations today is a failure to distinguish planning from strategizing." In this context strategizing is critical to leading innovation (Hamel, 1996, p. 71).

While goals and objectives are important, more significant importance lies in the area of developing the capacity for strategic thinking, mental model busting, and risk taking. Strategy creation means generating thousands of ideas and possibilities, not just a few. Developing the capacity for strategic thinking at the individual, group, and organizational level requires creating a means for people to talk about what they observe, to explore how this maps to the environment and, most importantly, to talk about possibilities. Gary Hamel cites the need to create powerful internal constituencies for "what could be" (Hamel, 2003). These new "what could
be” constituencies would match and even compete with the already powerful internal constituencies focused on “what is.”

Markides points out that uniqueness is transitory and that, while an organization might find a unique strategic position at any given moment, this position will not last as the environment changes, competition appears, and customers change. Libraries understand that they are, indeed, in competition with others for the attention of users as well as for resources to create customer solutions. Thus, libraries must also be willing to abandon successful approaches in order to search for and test new and innovative strategies (Casumano & Markides, 2001).

Implications for Organizational Development

Organizational development (OD) professionals in libraries and in the consulting organizations that serve libraries can assist libraries in discovering what they need to do to become more strategically innovative. From an OD perspective, organizations seeking to understand their innovation practices and strategy skills more clearly should undertake the following:

- organizational assessment (develop an organizational baseline)
- develop a dialogue about innovation and strategy
- invest in organizational learning and teach staff to be innovative strategic thinkers
- develop organizational systems that support the work of innovators and strategic thinkers throughout the organization

These four areas for organizational development work are described more fully below.

Benchmarking the Organization

Developing a baseline for the organization is an important first step in assessing areas for development. This baseline describes patterns of organizational behavior across multiple measures. One method for doing this is the organizational climate assessment—typically a survey instrument that allows the institution to see organizational behavior as measured across specific indicators. This tool can yield important information about how staff feels in terms of the ability to take risks, etc. Such a census needs a rationale and context in order to be taken seriously. The benefits of taking “the pulse” of the organization are multiple. The organization will have a snapshot of the climate at one moment in time, providing a platform for departure and for designing learning. In addition members of the organization will have data and a common language to discuss what is needed to make the organization more future oriented, more innovation oriented, and more satisfying for members.

One very strong research-based instrument is the Campbell Organization Survey (COS). The COS was developed by David P. Campbell, Smith-
Richardson Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Creative Leadership and a noted authority on assessment instruments. This instrument measures organizational satisfaction across seventeen indicators: the work itself, working conditions, level of stress, coworkers, diversity, supervision, top leadership, pay, benefits, job security, promotions, feedback, planning, ethics, quality, innovation, and general contentment. Either a sample is taken or the entire staff responds to the instrument. Results are charted in relation to the normative research data gathered by Campbell. This baseline can then be used to determine areas for growth and development and areas for celebration. The COS has been used in a few research libraries in the United States and Canada and has been widely used in higher education in general (Campbell, 1994).

Another assessment instrument, KEYS to Creativity, also developed by the Center for Creative Leadership in collaboration with Harvard University professor Teresa Amabile, focuses specifically on assessing management practices that support or inhibit the climate for creativity and innovation in an organization. Measures include organizational encouragement, supervisory encouragement, work group supports, sufficient resources, challenging work, freedom, organizational impediments, and workload pressure (Center for Creative Leadership, 1995). I do not know of any library that has used this assessment tool; however, it is possible that it would be of great interest to nonprofit organizations given their increasing need to do more with less—that is, to be creative and innovative.

Information gleaned from such instruments can be looked at in the context of other knowledge about the organization in order to develop a set of organizational and individual learning needs and growth plans. For instance, questions such as the following could be generated: do members of the organization need to learn more about creativity tools; does staff need to learn more about strategy creation and strategic thinking; do staff need customer-in thinking training or risk-taking help; does the organization spend more time maintaining internal systems than creating external solutions; and so on. An organization seeking to engage in strategic innovation needs to understand how it learns what it learns. Paying close attention to and pointing out organizational learning is something that all members of the organization can learn to do with the assistance of revealing data such as is made possible through the use of assessment instruments.

*Developing an Organizational Dialogue*

One of the most important activities an organization can engage in is the creation of multiple organizational dialogues. In the words of William Isaacs, “dialogue is a conversation in which people think together in relationship. Thinking together implies that you no longer take your own position as final. You relax your grip on certainty and listen to the possibilities that result simply from being in relationship with others—possibilities
that might not otherwise have occurred” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 19). The purpose of dialogues is to surface ideas, to explore perceptions and assumptions, to forge understanding, and, hopefully, to develop the ability for powerful collective insight. Dialogue requires members of an organization, department, or team to suspend the need for decision and/or closure in order to make room for a fuller exploration of a specific topic. For instance, a working group or team might choose to conduct a dialogue session to explore a topic such as the model used by the library to deliver reference services. The dialogue would not be conducted in order to make a decision but rather to better understand the group’s assumptions and knowledge of their perceptions about the way they deliver reference services. This enlightening activity, while uncomfortable and counterintuitive to many groups, often yields information that can be used later on to make effective decisions. The OD or human resources professional needs training in facilitating dialogue of this kind because it differs from other types of meetings that are often facilitated (such as management meetings, retreats, and so forth).

*In Investing in Organizational Learning*

Organizational learning, a concept first developed by Chris Argyris and Donald Schöon and more recently developed into a set of tools and practices by Peter Senge, refers to a set of practices useful to organizations in developing the ability to learn and to know how they learn. (Argyris & Schöon 1978, 1996; Senge, 1990) Practices such as the exploration of mental models—the understanding of the “deeply held internal images of how the world works” (Senge, 1990, p. 174)—and the testing of assumptions are crucial to the creation of innovations. Organizational learning also implies the freedom to take risks, to practice and experiment, and to make mistakes. Allowing play as part of learning is also fundamental to finding innovation potential.

Staff development in the areas of strategic thinking and creativity and innovation are as critical to the organization’s success as are the fundamental functional skills. Investment in the area of strategic thinking will pay off when members of the organization are able to recognize causal relationships between their assumptions or actions and the behaviors of their customers, just to name one important benefit. No amount of functional expertise and skill is useful if the customers of libraries turn elsewhere to get what they need rather than finding the innovations at the library. Investing in technical or functional expertise at the expense of investing in broader, organization-spanning skills is shortsighted. Staff need skill development in creativity tools, the process of innovation, and strategic thinking and strategy in general. These skills will help the organization focus on its mission in the most dynamic way possible regardless of external environmental factors.
Hamel has said, “Radical innovation comes from generating a collective sense of destiny, from unleashing the imagination of people across the organization and teaching people how to see unconventional opportunities” (Hamel, 2003, p. 3). What more powerful concept is there than the idea of “generating a collective sense of destiny?” We have seen how the public sector has utilized this energy to put new and innovative products in our hands. For example, consider Nokia’s industry-changing personalization of the cellular phone; everyone at Nokia had to embrace this humanization of the tool in order to create the variety of options they have produced. In the same way, the nonprofit organization can produce an inspiring, driving set of themes or foci in order to unleash the imagination and creative energy of staff.

Developing Organizational Systems that Support Innovation

The OD or human resources professional can help senior leadership design organizational systems that support and encourage innovative thinking and radical ideas. In some cases this may mean looking at the organization’s culture and considering what the impediments to strategic innovation might be and how those impediments might be removed. Ironically, it takes creative and innovative thought to develop internal mechanisms and systems that support creativity and innovation. Organizational leaders willing to abandon the safety of the now and the known in order to realistically be able to say they are willing to see people make mistakes on the road to innovation will be repaid through a higher level of commitment and energy throughout the organization. The OD specialist can certainly help senior leadership in creating a learning climate that fosters risk taking and engagement of the external environment.

Conclusion

Innovation and strategic thinking are critical to any organization’s future and have direct correlations to the organization’s mission and purpose. The development of methods for reducing barriers as well as increasing staff confidence, commitment, and skill levels is important if libraries are to become truly innovative. Understanding customer readiness and need as well as patterns of behavior can afford perspectives on where, how, and when an innovation might suit an organization.

The research on innovation and strategy shows that skills and abilities in these areas can be learned and applied. Indeed, libraries, such as the University of Arizona and Los Alamos National Laboratory Library, among numerous others, are engaged in learning and applying these skills and are doing so effectively. The experience of these libraries proves that it is possible to create space and energy for innovation through understanding organizational cultures better and through reinforcing organizational learning, risk taking, and strategic thinking.
As the late biologist Stephen Jay Gould expressed it, “Sometimes we do things that are not maximally efficient because they have human value” (Gould, 2002, p. 25). This is the reason for strategic innovation in the nonprofit world. Libraries create public value, but they must advance with their environments to continue to do so in a way that is valued by the public. Innovation and strategic thinking are the ways in which they can be clearly user oriented and customer driven, to use two hackneyed but very meaningful terms. Libraries create successful magic and learning; in order to innovate for the customer’s sake, however, it might mean forsaking some efficiencies.

Library leaders, particularly senior leaders, have a responsibility to serve the organization by encouraging a less static, more flexible environment. Additionally, leaders need to help stabilize the climate when the organization is deeply engaged in producing a disruptive innovation—that is, creating excitement and confidence at the same time in order to support staff in their efforts.

The development of leaders throughout libraries at all levels begins with the education they receive before they arrive at their first professional position: schools of library and information science also have a role to play in the development of strategic thinking skills and the understanding of how library organizations function and succeed.

Innovative acts are brave and courageous acts, and library staff needs to feel that these acts are worthwhile as well as worthy of the effort that goes into them. To create climates that encourage strategic innovation is to prepare an organization for the future as well as to meet the present.

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