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Continual Growth:

Environmental Enrichment and Encouraged Engagement



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Many animal activists feel that zoos stifle beasts' natural instincts and limit animals in harmful ways. Frustration and depression among the occupants ensues. Modern zoos have come up with methods, called environmental enrichments, to provide the occupants with surroundings that keep them engaged—new sights, sounds, aromas, tactile experiences. These might include obstacles or to get at preferred foods. Moving puzzles from place to place within their environment keeps them stimulated. Simple things changed in their environment allow them to exercise control or choice, provide challenges, and keep things interesting, ultimately enhancing their well-being.

While the people we supervise in libraries have considerably more freewill than animals in a zoo, sometimes the jobs we do can become repetitive and mundane and those performing them can feel nearly as stifled as a tiger in a cage. As libraries work to enrich the lives of our community by providing opportunities for lifelong learning, we should also be creating what Peter Senge referred to as the “learning organization.” Senge defined these as:

... organizations 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, 1994)

Creating learning organizations can be difficult. Often employees are so focused on the day-to-day of their job that they find it difficult to look beyond their core responsibilities. For many, the repetitiveness and lack of challenge might be something they say they like about the job. Still others with no ambitions of advancement see no reason to push themselves outside their comfort zones. Consequently, supervisors need to create environments that stimulate growth for individuals and the organization.

The first step in helping individuals in your organization to grow is to understand their interests and help them identify what opportunities exist. For many employees, keeping up with things that fall out of the scope of the typical responsibilities can be challenging. Creating development plans with each of your staff can help you to know your employees better and put you in a position to better understand and take note of what motivates and excites them about their job or the work of the library. Often these types of conversations only occur when the employee expresses interest in moving up or the supervisor identifies them as a mover and shaker. Consequently, those people who have no interest in promotion often fall between the cracks. Supervisors should make developmental plans with each direct report.

These plans need not be formal documents. The city of Beaverton, OR uses a tool called Performance, Planning, Dialogue, & Development (PPDD) instead of a formal performance review. While this system does have its flaws, the focus on informal conversations allows opportunity to learn about employees on a more personal level. This knowledge can assist you in pointing staff toward enrichment opportunities. Through these discussions I have learned about the lives of my employees outside of the library. This knowledge has helped me to better understand what types of trainings and job assignments will be of interest to them. When I learn about events happening outside our division that would



be a good fit, I personally let them know and make the connection for them with the staff person in charge of that program or service. Too often we send out e-mails or put up signs asking for volunteers for special assignments and then are discouraged when no one does so. The reality is that many people underestimate their skills and do not offer assistance for that reason. Asking directly eliminates these assumptions and inspires confidence and trust with the employee. It also eliminates the assumption that the offer is just being made for specific job classifications.

Adherence to job classification often stifles our ability to create a learning organization. We sometimes assume that as supervisors we cannot ask someone to do something outside his job description. However, these assignments often give fulfillment to the employee, something better than financial reward for most of us. For example, in my last position, I supervised shelvers and clerks (as I do now). One shelver, Dustin, had an idea for creating a display area for adult graphic novels. Rather than pass this information along to the Adult Services division, I asked that manager if Dustin could create and maintain this display. He worked with the librarian who oversaw that collection, Louise, to find a space. When some teens expressed interest in creating an anime club to Louise, rather than turning them down because there was insignificant staff budgeted to oversee it, Louise immediately thought of Dustin and we coordinated his schedule so that he could be available a few hours a month to prepare and facilitate the club. In most organizations, even those where unions represent a large percentage of the staff, contracts typically allow for a small percentage of time to be spent on duties outside job description in order to allow for development of staff and succession planning.

Sometimes these growth opportunities can be created through new programs such as the above example, or sometimes it can happen due to the necessity of a current program outgrowing the staff available. At Beaverton City Library, we receive a great deal of assistance from volunteers. Each division of the library has a volunteer partner. Circulation and the Branch have two. Previously all training of new volunteers was done by the Volunteer Partners—in both divisions, the Leads fill this role. However, in Circulation, once the volunteer is trained they work most closely with the Library Aide 1 (shelvers). The Leads have taken on more duties around library account problems and training of staff for their own growth. Additionally, they work the desk for half of their shifts. It was becoming increasingly more difficult to coordinate times for new volunteers to be trained. Out of necessity, we talked to the Library Aide 1s about becoming the primary trainers for volunteers in our division. While we did offer it to all, we specifically asked individuals who we had observed as being receptive to volunteer questions and generally more willing to correct mistakes as they saw them. We have done several Train the Trainer sessions so that the employees felt prepared to take on this new responsibility.

When you have employees who are thirsty for a new experience, providing these types of opportunities might be all you need to do. But what about those employees who state they have no desire to take on new responsibilities or to grow? It seems in every organization you have the people who volunteer for every new duty and those folks who are content to do their job, do it well, and go home at the end of the day. They work to live rather than live to work. And what is wrong with that? Absolutely nothing—as long as employees



desire to have no changes in their role does not impede the organizations ability to grow. However, as the role of the library changes from repository of books to center for community lifelong learning, the duties of librarians have consequently evolved. In the current culture of libraries, people refusing to change can hinder our ability to provide the services that our community needs.

Again, supervisors have a responsibility to create environments where growth and a learning culture are encouraged. Development plans should focus on employee interests, but they should also focus on organizational needs. Those organizational needs have to outweigh the desires of staff. If the use of certain services has diminished, that service cannot be maintained simply because you have employees who like providing it. This situation has arisen in libraries where the need to have staff sitting at a desk providing reference service has declined. As many libraries have found, staying relevant to your community means getting out into your community. But for those employees that excel at providing reference service, it can be scary to contemplate a future where something in which you excel has been deemed no longer a core function of your job. In order to help staff make this transition more smoothly, training should be provided to help where gaps exist between organizational needs and organizational knowledge.

Creating a learning organization starts from the top down. Managers at every level have to make training part of each person's development plan. What skills does that great reference librarian need to make him or her more comfortable providing outreach? Has the organization failed to provide much needed computer trainings because no one feels competent to do the teaching? Training can be found for free or minimal cost through many on-line sources now. At Beaverton City Library we have created a Training Committee. One of the main functions of the committee will be to identify trainings offered free or at a minimal cost which will enrich the employees of the organization. These trainings will be available to all staff regardless of role. A few resources which provide great training opportunities for staff are:

<http://nwcentral.org/>


<http://www.ala.org/lita/learning/online>

<http://infopeople.org/>

Research reinforces the need to provide growth opportunities for staff. In the book *12: The elements of great managing*, Rodd Wagner & James Harter, PH.D identified factors employees across organizations gave as important to their engagement with their job. Their findings showed that opportunities to learn and grow ranked highly as a reason why people remain with an employer and stay engaged with their jobs (Wagner & Harter, 2006). Understanding how to keep employees engaged and happy directly relates to the success of a company's mission (Wagner & Harter, 2006). Supervisors will be more successful in their missions by developing a learning environment where employee satisfaction and engagement are key goals of the organization. Wagner and Harter also found in their research that "a connection with the mission of the company" led to a higher level of engagement. (Wagner & Harter, 2006) As staff take on new roles and challenges, they can be reminded



of the true mission of the library and be better able to “see the whole together” as Senge calls it.

Just like lions, tigers, and bears, humans can become frustrated and depressed by a work environment that stifles their natural instinct to grow. As supervisors we can bring environmental enrichment to our staffs’ work life. By providing new work experiences, trainings, and opportunities to bring personal interests to work, we help keep an engaged and engaging group of people providing services to their community. 

Resources

Senge, Peter (1994). *The fifth discipline fieldbook: Strategies and tools for building a learning organization*. New York: Currency, Doubleday.

Wagner, R.& Harter, J. (2006). *12: The elements of great managing*. New York, NY: Gallup Press.

