EDITORIAL BOARD THOUGHTS

Building a Culture of Resilience in Libraries

Paul Swanson

We find ourselves a year and a half into the global pandemic, and libraries—just like the rest of the workforce—have been navigating through a drastic amount of change in a short amount of time with no real guideposts as to what may come next. Libraries were completely shut down, library staff displaced, and library services transformed in a short period of time like they hadn't been before. We've also found that as we've reopened our libraries there are new patron and staff expectations. It is expected that the changes that we've enacted in the middle of a crisis will continue and will be folded into a new service delivery model. Patrons have different expectations of libraries; library staff have different expectations of management and of the technology that drives library services and their day-to-day work. In order to meet these new expectations, we've embarked on a path of implementing more flexibility into our environments and workflows. I feel however that the concept of flexibility misses the mark. Flexibility is about being open to change and reacting to it, and possibly taking different paths to solving a common problem. Flexibility though is part of a broader concept that I think we need to embrace, and that is resiliency.

Resiliency is defined as "tending to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change."[1] We've all reacted and persevered through the last year and a half in our own way, but I would bet that those organizations that have a culture of resiliency have fared better. Organizations that pride themselves on their flexibility can sometimes be more reactionary than anything. A problem arises and they may be quick to change, to flex and react. A resilient organization can make the conscious decision to absorb the problem, make a change that can be rolled back when the time is right, or even make it permanent. They have built a resilient foundation across the organization that allows them to not just be flexible when a problem arises, but instead assimilate the solutions to the challenges that come up. Flexibility is what you do, resilience is what you are.

To be more resilient with the technology that your library uses and depends on, is really rather easy. It means doing all those things that you have always meant to do but haven't made the time for. You are building that foundation that your organization can rely on when change or misfortune strikes. That foundation is what enables you to make positive change through a crisis. It is what can keep you from making reactionary decisions. Let's talk through a few of the different places where you can instill resilience in your organization.

The stronger your change management practices are, the more resilient your technology will be. All the way from governance for changes, to documentation around decision making, and to a detailed history of the changes that have been made to your systems. It sounds like a lot because it is a lot, but you have to start now. You need to be able to think beyond today's current state of your systems and understand where you were in the past, and how you got to where you are today. You cannot effectively make changes to your systems, especially in the midst of a crisis, if you don't know why you've done the things you've done up to this point. You also need that disaster recovery plan that you've always meant to start and keep updated. Think of a disaster recovery plan as a set of decisions that have already been made so you have the latitude to act in a crisis without the usual bureaucracy of change governance. In your disaster recovery plans, make

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sure you have defined roles for everyone who is involved. Make sure that communication has just as important of a role as resolving the crisis at hand. You need to finish that disaster recovery plan and keep it updated if you are going to instill resilience into your technology and organization.

When it comes down to building resilience in the decisions that you are making, you need to start integrating the concept of two-way decision making into your process.[2] A two-way decision is reversible. Yes, most decisions that we make feel like a one-way street. Anything from starting a new service, applying for a grant, or purchasing a new technology platform. But we can temper this by applying two-way decision making to the implementation decisions for the project or activity that we are undertaking. Even if you just plan on ways to mitigate the impact of a decision gone wrong, you are building resilience into your decision-making process. You should also go beyond asking "How can we roll this decision back?" by having discussions around "What are the impacts this decision might have that would cause us to roll it back?" Defining those evaluation metrics before you embark on a path can help to make your decisions more resilient. If you think about decisions as a two-way door and incorporate both the how and the why into them, you will be on your way to having a much more resilient change management process.

When it comes to building resilience into our day-to-day workflows, we have to paradoxically standardize how we do work. If we are going to be more flexible and absorb change, it would be reasonable to think that we should support many different ways of working. However, that type of work fragmentation doesn't scale to a hybrid work environment. It is just too much to try to support a work environment where common tasks are performed differently by staff that are physically located almost anywhere. Therefore, we need to standardize how we work in order to support a hybrid work environment. Staff communications and expectations need to be the same for every single staff member. Everyone uses instant messaging or no one does. Everyone keeps their calendar up to date. Meetings are held with the same expectations whether a one-on-one with a supervisor or a team brainstorming session. This is foundational to incorporating resilience into the organization. You need to be able to rely on consistent communication channels when a crisis is thrust upon you. Workflows that have been traditionally on-premise all need to be re-envisioned into cloud-based processes. Work needs to be performed from anywhere, and the only way you can do that effectively is by standardizing how that work is accomplished. The more exceptions that you allow to this, the more you will run into problems with change. This type of standardization has to be ingrained into the culture of the organization with a top-down approach. Therefore, it is imperative that those at the top of the library's org chart embody this standardization. Building this type of operational resilience will go a long way towards having that strong foundation that you can rely on across your organization.

Through the pandemic, many libraries focused on core services, reimagining them so they can function in new ways during the crisis. Pandemic-prompted services that may well be permanent include increased use of pop-up libraries and bookmobiles, low-touch self-service kiosks, and webinar-based story times, among others.[3] These are the types of changes and decisions that are upon us right now and may very well take up all of the oxygen in the room. However, we still need to make sure that we dedicate resources to that next thing. We can't overcorrect and only circle the wagons around the delivery of our core services. We have future challenges that we will have to meet. The seeds of the solutions to those challenges may be growing right now in an open source project, a new resource sharing standard, or an innovative use of blockchain. Even if, in the end, you don't take on those projects, you will help build resilience into your library by expanding awareness and understanding. Just as the speed of societal change always seems to be increasing,

the speed of expectations for libraries will be increasing. We have to make sure that we continue to dedicate resources into understanding, researching, and building those new services that are only now on the horizon.

None of the things that I've said are new or groundbreaking. The urgency is what is new. Delivery of library services has permanently changed over the past 18 months. How work gets done has permanently changed as well. The only way that we will be able to contend with this new paradigm is to do all of those things that we know we should be doing. Shore up your foundations. Absorb the change that has happened and will continue to happen. Don't be reactionary or fight for your own personal work needs. Be confident problem solvers and work together for the strength of your library and for the needs of your patrons. Instill resilience in the work that you do and the services that your library provides and it will help you to endure through whatever may come next.

ENDNOTES

[1] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilient.

[2] Jeff Haden, "Why Emotionally Intelligent People Embrace the 2-Way-Door Rule to Make Better and Faster Decisions," *Inc.*, July 6, 2021, https://www.inc.com/jeff-haden/why-emotionally-intelligent-people-embrace-2-way-doors-rule-to-make-better-faster-decisions.html.

[3] Ellen Rosen, "Beyond the Pandemic, Libraries Look toward a New Era," *The Baltimore Sun*, September 27, 2020, https://www.baltimoresun.com/featured/sns-nyt-libraries-digital-resources-beyond-the-pandemic-20200927-lrgsracn6jhandorc37lxngnye-story.html.