Using the Power of Proposals for Creative Change

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Abstract

As a means of encouraging creativity and innovation across the organization, the Gumberg Library of Duquesne University developed a proposal process and template. All proposals are directed to the university librarian for approval, but the process of completing the proposal template empowers librarians and staff to collaborate with co-workers as they answer a series of basic questions: 1) Statement of problem or idea; 2) Proposed actions; 3) Estimated costs; 4) Stakeholders consulted/impact on other units; 5) Implementation—who is responsible for what, how, when? 6) Communication plan—who needs to know and how will the message be communicated; and 7) Assessment—how will we know if the change/project has been effective? The proposals approved and implemented using this methodology show evidence of creative and critical thinking, collaboration, responsibility and accountability. The outcomes have been positive, demonstrating the power of individuals to make a difference.

Introduction

Decision-making is a classic function of management, as are the related responsibilities of planning, organizing, budgeting, supervising and directing (Barnard, 1950). A standard job description for a library director or university librarian includes these terms as well as more contemporary expectations of leadership, vision, advocacy, technological expertise, interpersonal skills, and fundraising. Creativity is seldom listed as a requirement on position announcements. However, writers on library leadership do discuss and affirm the need for creativity within the context of innovation and change (Lubans, 1987; Riggs, 1997; Hernon & McClure, 1990; Petrowski, 2000).

Library strategic plans identify pertinent change strategies for competitive advantage and positioning. In addition, periodic assessment of library resources and services is important for targeting areas of excellence and those that need to be changed and improved. Conceptualizing and implementing change is not a proprietary function restricted to the director. In an empowered organization, each
employee should feel a responsibility to propose needed changes and a pathway to accomplish them. A key role of administration, then, is to make decisions that support individual and group creativity with the overall objective of organizational effectiveness.

Over a period of several years, the management team of the Gumberg Library, Duquesne University, developed and refined a simple tool which empowers staff to propose needed change. The tool is a one-page memorandum formatted as a Word template and available on the internal shared server. The case study which follows seeks to demonstrate how the proposal process has stimulated innovation and creativity leading to organizational improvement and effectiveness.

First Generation Process

The first generation decision-making construct was an approve/disapprove memo. Modifying a communication device used at a previous institution, the university librarian encouraged librarians and supervisors to submit recommendations in this format. The basic elements included the statement of problem/need and the recommended solution. Formatted as a memo, the document also included a line for the university librarian to sign off with approval or disapproval and return the page to the sender.

The advantages of a very simple memo included brevity, succinctness, communication feedback, and a “paper trail” documenting decisions made. A secondary function was use as a transmittal form to delegate subtasks. This format was adequate for many purposes, such as communicating hiring recommendations, requesting funds for special speakers and trainers, recommending the purchase of specific databases and products, and obtaining administrative approval of library hours. Some librarians added substantially to the justification and recommendation sections in order to elaborate on project implementation.

During the four-year period (2003-2007) that this was the expected form of decision-making communication, many fine ideas were proposed and implemented. Over time we realized that only a few people actually used the memo to make non-routine recommendations. Most staff were unaware that they could make suggestions directly to the university librarian. Further, the format was too simple and did not include all the factors necessary to document organizational accomplishments and effectiveness as the university began to expect formal assessment at the program level. For example, how could we assess the degree to which the proposal accomplished the intended end? We also discovered that we needed to improve communication across the organization and with constituents as we developed and implemented changes.
Second Generation Process

A more elaborate proposal is a structural framework that provides essential strategies for “communicating, realigning, and renegotiating formal patterns and policies” (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 372). Change theorists like John Kotter (2002) have described specific stages evident in successful change initiatives. In rethinking the process, the university librarian took into consideration lessons from the literature of change and articulated the intention that a formal process should:

- stimulate critical thinking about issues and solutions
- support innovation and change
- encourage communication across all units within the library
- create a standardized format for framing all elements of the proposal process
- provide documentation for decision-making, assessment, and reports (including annual reports, accreditation reports, and performance evaluations).

While retaining the memo format, the management team agreed to add several categories to the original problem/need statement and recommended actions, including:

- Estimated costs
- Stakeholders consulted/impact on other units
- Implementation (who is responsible for what, how, when?)
- Communication plan (who needs to know and how will the message be communicated?)
- Assessment (how will we know if the change/project has been effective?)

The above series of questions guides the individual through a directed thought process that is intended to improve the quality of the proposal. We discovered that having a written communications plan also helped in informing users of new services and policies. The public relations/development librarian offered her assistance to proposal developers to ensure that all forms of distributing information (library web page, campus web page, flyers, announcements, press releases) were covered. Finally, the chair of the Assessment Committee provides help in considering quantitative and qualitative assessment measures at the beginning of the process. With the new emphasis on assessment, the library is mindful of the need to collect and evaluate data and establish reasonable and attainable expectations for determining success.

Training

In order to inform all staff of the mechanics of the proposal process and to invite and encourage everyone to use the process, the university librarian and the health sciences librarian collaborated to develop and present a staff workshop. The workshop, which was held on June 14, 2007, signaled the official launch of the improved process. The stated goals of the workshop were that staff would 1)
understand the internal proposal process; 2) begin using proposals as a means to identify new library services, collections, and programs in support of the library’s mission; and 3) recognize how proposals can foster innovation and strengthen team spirit. The presentation offered friendly advice to warm staff to the opportunity to make a difference by identifying a challenge or problem that they recognize in the library.

As a way to gain support and confidence, staff should discuss the idea with their supervisor. This step is a courtesy so supervisors are not blindsided when staff become assertive in making recommendations. There is risk in sharing ideas with an immediate supervisor, but there is also danger in bypassing the supervisor. Most staff recognize that these political realities exist in any organization (Casey & Stephens, 2007), and we decided to discuss the issue openly. Similarly, we encouraged staff to give the university librarian a heads-up when the proposal has a budget impact, requires additional staff, or may be jeopardized by bad timing or the fiscal calendar. At this early stage of thinking about a problem, both the supervisor and the university librarian can ask questions and offer advice before the librarian or staff becomes overly invested in writing the proposal.

Since many staff were not accustomed to thinking about library problems and solutions in such a proactive and structured way, the workshop included an exercise in which small groups identified an opportunity or challenge; proposed an action or solution; described the costs involved or how one would find the actual costs; identified the stakeholders within the library; outlined an implementation plan; drafted a communication plan; and listed assessment measures. Following this discussion time, the groups shared their proposals.

Finally, workshop presenters encouraged staff interested in creating proposals to do a little research and investigate whether someone else has already tried to implement a similar process in the library or on campus. Similarly, staff should try to discover any best practices documented in the literature or a similar effort at a nearby academic or public library. As an urban library in Pittsburgh, the Gumberg Library is in close proximity to research and special libraries as well as an accredited school of library and information sciences. It is reasonable to expect librarians, and staff as well, to develop a peer-to-peer relationship with a colleague at a nearby library to compare notes on work issues and processes and get ideas. The Library Committee of the Pittsburgh Council on Higher Education even sponsors events called “swap talks” at least annually to encourage dialogue and the sharing of best practices across the ten member institutions’ libraries. Many of the Gumberg Library staff have attended these events or participated in presentations hosted at Duquesne.

Outcomes and Evidence

In retrospect, the proposal process had started to evolve about one year before the workshop. The individuals on the library management team have
consistently produced the greatest volume of proposals on substantial issues. Several of these librarians also lead standing committees that are responsible for analyzing library needs and recommending change. Developing proposals has become a logical part of their work responsibilities. For example, the collection management librarian submitted proposals on changing the acquisitions workflow; redefining responsibilities for negotiating license agreements for electronic resources; creating a collection policy team; spending one-time collection funds; relocating print theses and dissertations. The systems librarian submitted a proposal on the disposition of color printers, and he collaborated with the access services librarian on upgrading and expanding library circulating laptop services. One of the reference librarians proposed the creation of a Popular Reading Room, and another reference librarian proposed a template for presenting library policies. The serials/electronic resources librarian proposed downsizing the print collection of *Chemical Abstracts*. The head cataloger and the systems librarian collaborated to propose a new spine label creation system and workflow. While all of these proposals were approved and implemented, not all proposals submitted have been approved. In some cases the idea was good but the proposal was not well thought out. In other cases the proposal could have been strengthened or reconsidered through collaboration between individuals or departments. A few proposals still await a new budget before implementation is possible.

One notable success story is the case of a long-time clerical employee in circulation who recognized that our method of mailing a sequence of letters to notify users of overdue items was antiquated, expensive, and ineffective. He worked with the systems librarian to investigate options for improvement and received coaching and encouragement from his supervisor to write a proposal. His idea to use system-generated email notices was approved but the changes required pilot testing and extensive troubleshooting with the system vendor before they worked. So far the new process is making a positive difference in user communication and the timely recovery of overdue items. Based on this success, the clerical employee and the systems librarian are now collaborating to automate the final bill notice and possibly generate email notices to users who have requested materials to be held at the service desk.

An example of critical timing is a proposal from a part-time reference librarian to create a blog so students could contribute comments on the One Book selection. The university librarian approved the proposal in concept and referred it to the Web Committee. Due to the institution’s inability to support blog software at the time of submission, the Web Committee had to put this proposal on hold for a full year. Now, the campus web group is using the proposal as a conceptual framework for blogs.

The largest number of proposals was contributed by the director of information services who oversees reference and instruction, circulation, and resource sharing functions. The proposal format has been an excellent fit for her management style and for communicating to the university librarian recommendations for operational decisions related to her broad responsibilities.
That said, she has also collaborated with librarians within her area to develop proposals for new initiatives such as Project SAILS, staff development opportunities, and customer service training. Several of her ideas and proposals have yielded transformative change. The first is the concept of regularly scheduled faculty development workshops about library resources taught by librarians and staff. Called “First Fridays,” this series has been well-attended by faculty and graduate students, and a number of academic departments have requested encore sessions customized to their discipline. Each session is filmed and made available on the library web page for asynchronous viewing at http://wwwSites.duq.edu/library/about/aboutFirstFridays.shtml. The second extremely successful proposal recommended the purchase of RefWorks. Not only did the proposal address cost and functionality, it also covered training and assessment using the First Friday venue and communication flyers with a distinctive brand and logo.

The health sciences librarian has also used proposals with creative results. As an early adopter of technologies that support instruction and information resources, this librarian monitors the environment for excellent ideas and trends. As a member of the Electronic Resources Review Committee (ERRC), he partnered with key librarians who would implement the action steps as he developed the proposals. His two notable proposals were implementing Google Scholar as a de facto federated searching platform for all library resources and similarly implementing PubMed @ Duquesne. This librarian offers workshops on searching tips, and the library now provides search boxes for Google Scholar and PubMed on its home page http://www.library.duq.edu.

By the end of the 2007 academic year it was evident that the proposal process had been adopted effectively by most of the librarians and definitely by the management team. At this point the university librarian requested formal assessment reports on projects completed through a full cycle from the proposal process. As formal evidence of organizational productivity and effectiveness, a total of thirteen reports were integrated into the 2006-2007 library annual report. Additional topics not already mentioned include the centralization of electronic resource use statistics, classification of bibliographies, virtual reference, and Ask Here PA. In addition, two projects included collaborations outside the library. The English Department proposed having a satellite service in the library, and this became the Writing Center @ Your Library. The university librarian collaborated with the Allegheny County Library Association to launch campus participation in One Book One Community @ Duquesne University. All of these cases were incorporated as evidence of organizational transformation into reports written for regional accreditation by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.
Next Steps

At this point in time the librarians at Gumberg are investigating the use of professional portfolios to document their accomplishments and progress toward promotion and career development. The evidence of proposals and assessment reports, collected over time, will be valuable as documentation for individual and group achievement. As a full body of evidence, the proposals and improvements they represent show the progress of a faculty department.

Staff turnover, particularly in part-time positions, is an organizational reality. More training and formal communication is needed so new staff can understand the opportunities to think critically and creatively about work processes and to contribute to the process of writing proposals for change. The university librarian, in particular, has the opportunity to meet with all staff about the culture of change and continuous improvement. The proposal framework will be useful in helping staff focus on specifics while also thinking more theoretically about change. Regular reminders of the proposal as a change mechanism can be integrated into staff development programs.

Finally, the management team can consider ongoing refinement and improvement of the proposal template as it relates to future planning and implementation efforts. This group represents functional work groups or processes but also shares decision-making and leadership responsibility with the university librarian. The creativity and continual learning of these individuals is critical to the effectiveness of the organization both short-term and long-term. The trend for assessment and evidence-based decision-making (Oakleaf, 2007) will continue to influence the change process at Gumberg Library.

Conclusion

After five years of using a simple proposal template as a tool for creativity and innovation, the Gumberg Library at Duquesne University has established an extensive body of evidence showing organizational improvement and effectiveness. Managers expanded the outline as they gained experience using the tool and as the expectations for improved communications and assessment were incorporated into the change process. All staff are empowered to contribute their creativity and critical thinking toward innovation and improvement. The proposal process has strengthened the quality of decision-making, and it has supported both project and program assessment. As the organization looks to the future, the expectation and the process for creative change will be affirmed through expanded training and communication, and the proposal template will continue to provide a pathway for sound practice.
Appendix

Gumberg Library
Duquesne University
Proposal Template

TO: Dr. Laverna Saunders, University Librarian

FROM:

DATE:

RE:

JUSTIFICATION:

Statement of Problem:

Proposed actions:

Estimated costs:

Stakeholders consulted/impact on other units:

Implementation: (Who is responsible for what, how, when)

Communication plan: (Who needs to know and how will message be communicated?)

Assessment: (How will we know if the change/project has been effective?)

Approved

Dr. Laverna Saunders Date

Disapproved

Distribution: (use this if you want a signed copy to come back to you; also list any other intended recipients)
References


