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# Leadership Reflections: Resiliency in Library Organizations

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**Column Title:** Leadership Reflections

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Column Editor's Notes. Leadership skills are essential to creating libraries that are effective and relevant in their communities. While some individuals seem to possess inherent leadership capabilities, it is possible to develop and strengthen skills to effectively lead a department, unit, or organization. This column explores ways for librarians and library workers to improve their knowledge and abilities as they lead their units, libraries, communities, and the library profession. Interested authors are invited to submit articles for this column to the editor at [maggie.farrell@unlv.edu](mailto:maggie.farrell@unlv.edu).

### **Leadership Reflections: Resiliency in Library Organizations**

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#### **Abstract**

Similar to individuals, organizations display characteristics that speak to qualities and abilities. Our guest writer, Lisa Bodenheimer, discusses a trait that is critical for library organizations during this period of constant change and transformation. Resiliency is the ability to rebound and flex as circumstances shift enabling an organization to thrive and adjust during difficult times. This skill is typically developed through experiences but as Ms. Bodenheimer outlines, organizations are able to strategize in order to build employee and organizational resilience. Such a proactive approach will enable a library organization to better weather challenging situations and times as difficulties will enviably occur. The following provides practical suggestions for library organizations that will enable them to be more successful while leading and managing in a changing environment.

**Keywords:** leadership, resilience, change management

#### **Introduction**

Resilience is a term used in many different fields ranging from psychology and education, to management, to environmental science. In all of these fields it is used to mean 'bouncing back or springing back from adversity.' This definition has been refined and expanded to include many different attributes, some of which are applicable to organizations. Personal resilience is also possible. That is, a person can either be or become resilient in the face of

negative circumstances in their life. Organizations can also be or become resilient in the face of adverse events.

This reflection is about how library organizations can become resilient or recognize their own resilience. Over the past 20 or 30 years, libraries have been greatly affected by changes in how they do their work and even in what their missions are. Technology and the Internet have revolutionized how libraries and librarians do their work, and they have revolutionized how people do research in either their personal or professional lives. Furthermore, the instability in which many library organizations find themselves, due to rapidly changing conditions in their parent organizations, can be seen as an opportunity to discover and develop an organizational culture that champions and rewards resilience.

One of the challenges in learning about libraries as resilient organizations is that there is very little direct research on the topic. To learn about resilience and how to cultivate resilience in libraries, one must read in the psychology and management literature and extrapolate what might be useful. What follows is what I have found and what meshes with my own experience as a librarian and supervisor/manager. I propose a twofold strategy of encouraging resilient employees and fostering an organizational culture that supports resilience. There is some overlap between the two, but it is mostly in perspective.

### **First Consideration—How Can Leaders Encourage Resilience in Employees?**

There are a number of concepts related to employee resilience in organizational life. The first of those is *well-being*, or, generally, satisfaction. Employees who work in an organization that ensures their well-being are more likely to be able to withstand adversity, whether from without or within. A case study describing an organization-led initiative to foster well-being after

the Christchurch, New Zealand earthquake in 2011 has much to offer. This financial organization created a “well-being” initiative based on *The Five Ways to Well-Being* framework that posits that employees can “increase well-being by engaging in everyday actions that direct attention towards things that bring pleasure and meaning” (Aked, et al., 2009, quoted in Näswall, et al, 2017, p. 508). The five ways are Connect, Give, Take Notice, Keep Learning, and Be Active. This particular organization set up training for middle managers on how to encourage the Five Ways in themselves and in their employees. These Five Ways, at first blush, sound like a feel-good mantra. However, the case study states that this training had a number of positive outcomes: there is now a specific focus on well-being in the organization; middle managers have created a framework for support among themselves; and there was a measurable decrease in voluntary turnover (Näswall, et al., 2017, p. 510-511). Effective leaders realize the importance of resilience-building skills and provide opportunities for their employees to strengthen them.

In times of great organizational change (such as during a reorganization), the well-being of individuals can suffer, due to uncertainty and other factors which keep them from functioning effectively. As a response to adversity and/or change within the organization, employees can isolate themselves somewhat and withdraw from their job, their colleagues, or even the organization. This does not lend itself to well-being or resilience; it is a defense mechanism that does not encourage learning or taking notice of anything that’s going on, and it patently discourages any kind of connection (or communication). It is a very natural reaction, however; employees need to fight against this if they can, and managers and supervisors need to help their employees fight this. It is sometimes quite difficult to fight this reaction if the overall work environment is negative and resistant to change.

A good way for library employees to fight against the tendency to isolate oneself in adversity is to foster their own well-being and resilience. Employees can take advantage of professional development offerings through their library's employee assistance program, through workshops, or through professional reading. These activities can produce a positive outcome, in that the employee can be proactive about taking charge of the situation themselves. This does require some willingness on the part of the employee to look within themselves and decide what they can change and what they cannot. This effort should not be taken lightly or viewed as a quick or easy fix—it takes time. Plus, it is not for everyone. For employees who are reluctant to take this step alone, supervisors and managers can also prepare to coach them through work-related challenges and provide help. Leaders can begin by consulting with human resources professionals in the organization to learn about this kind of coaching. Further assistance might be available from the employee assistance program, or from professional workshops and reading. Furthermore, leaders can offer indirect support by giving employees time to attend training or pinpointing particular educational opportunities for them.

Another strategy for developing employee resilience, but on a broader level, is through organizational *human resources policies and procedures* that allow employees to be more proactive about their work and encourage problem-solving, reflection, and individual hardiness. Many practices and HR principles are possible. Some are applicable to and already in use in libraries: continuous development opportunities, broad job descriptions, cross-departmental task forces, and results-based appraisals are suggested (Lengnick-Hall, Beck, and Lengnick-Hall, 2011, Table 1, p. 249). As libraries re-organize to meet their new mission(s), they can encourage these kinds of practices within the organization. Continuous development opportunities provide education for employees about things that may be useful in the new organization. Broad job

descriptions may allow employees to learn or take on different types of duties, thus providing that there is always someone available to take care of a problem when it presents itself. Cross-departmental task forces may allow for varying perspectives on an issue and may foster greater efficiency if the group is examining a commonly-held workflow or practice. Results-based appraisals can be specific and inform employees about how they can improve their work. Moreover, allowing the employee to participate in the appraisal by completing a self-assessment, or by supplying pertinent data or information, may build engagement in the appraisal process and ultimately engagement in the job. Effective internal policies, procedures, and approaches such as these can build resilience from the bottom-up and communicate the expectation to employees that personal resilience is important to the organization.

### **Further Considerations—How Can Leaders Create a Resilient Organization?**

In addition to encouraging employees to develop personal resilience and providing support to do so, leaders can cultivate qualities of a resilient organization. The current climate of strategic planning initiatives in many types of educational organizations can positively impact organizational resilience. As a result of these initiatives, many libraries create organizational values statements. In a short survey of these statements, gathered by a Google search of the terms ‘organizational values’ and ‘libraries,’ many libraries have used the terms ‘adaptability,’ ‘flexibility,’ ‘innovation,’ and ‘creativity.’ Adaptability and flexibility are related to resilience, in that they can lead to it (Lengnick-Hall, et al, 2011). Innovation and creativity sometimes grow out of the kinds of adaptability and flexibility we often see in libraries.

However, flexibility and adaptability can sometimes be hindered by the zeal for consistency and efficiency. The consistency libraries strive for is undergirded by procedures and standards, which are sometimes not very flexible. These are often not well understood or even

misunderstood by library users or library workers. Resilience is less likely to happen in an organization which relies overmuch on regulations, rules and stringent operational procedures. This happens because these regulations can prevent open thinking (Lengnick-Hall, et al, 2011). When someone has an overall knowledge of why policies and procedures are the way they are, it is possible to “bend the rules.” The expertise required to do that, however, often comes only after much experience is gained. After building their own decision-making skills, leaders can coach their managers and employees in developing and overseeing policies to allow more flexible decision-making.

Here is a true-to-life example. In at least some library operational units, standards are becoming more flexible and easier to follow. An example of this is the contrast between cataloging standards, particularly the MARC format and metadata standards such as Dublin Core. Dublin Core is much less ‘granular’ than commonly-used cataloging standards; it requires less detail about a resource. It also allows for more flexibility in assigning descriptive metadata. Sometimes, catalogers bemoan the simplification of cataloging and metadata work in the use of these newer standards. In reality, the work is far from being simplified, it is simply becoming more flexible. Changes such as these can foster resiliency in both organizations and individuals.

Other characteristics of resilient organizations are also reflected in the management literature. A useful concept for libraries is the idea that resilience can be either *adaptive*, in response to a crisis or other adversity, or *inherent*, which is found in times of relative calm and stability and occurs in response to incremental changes that occur routinely (Kuntz, Näswall, and Malinen, 2016). While libraries sometimes experience the kind of drastic, disruptive change that requires adaptive resilience, the need for inherent resilience is more common in libraries. Developing and maintaining employee well-being and work engagement are essential to

developing inherent resilience, and organizations can support resilience among their employees by crafting an environment that promotes it. This environment can include such practical things as encouraging employee suggestions for operational improvements and the development of innovative solutions to problems in daily work (Kuntz, et al., 2016). The idea of allowing and encouraging innovative solutions to problems seems to support the organizational values that libraries have created. So, creating organizational values can be more than an exercise for a strategic planning initiative—it can become an opportunity to communicate and even shape a culture of resilience and innovation. Leadership that encourages this type of activity supports inherent resiliency within the organization.

At the *Resilient Organisations* website, one can find three interdependent attributes and 13 indicators of organizational resilience. While the three attributes are very broad and serve mostly as a way to group the thirteen indicators of organizational resilience, the indicators themselves suggest that libraries are generally resilient organizations, or on their way to becoming resilient. Libraries can and do promote such attributes as staff engagement, devising proactive solutions to problems found, maintaining effective partnerships within and outside the library, breaking down silos, and pushing down decision-making to the lowest level. All of these things can also promote well-being and engagement among employees.

For example, staff engagement can spring from allowing employees to do and know more than just push computer keys or how to “turn a widget”; that is, understanding only what they do but not how it fits into the bigger picture. When given a chance to see the larger picture and the impact of their work on others in the organization, employees can often see ways to improve the services they provide. On an everyday basis, operational units work together to further the library’s mission; no one is able to do this alone. More broadly though, encouraging effective

partnerships within operational units is also common in libraries. For example, I recently participated in a “metadata summit” that brought together members of various units to explore common aims and workflows for digital projects metadata. This kind of activity fosters collaboration and partnerships between operational units. In addition, over time, employees can also gain deep expertise in the operations they work in. Allowing experienced employees to participate in decision-making has the potential to improve operations *and* the overall quality of the organization’s services. Allowing *all* library employees to make decisions about their own work or the culture they work in is very affirming and builds employee engagement and well-being.

An area in which libraries might find more difficulty is the breaking down of operational silos. Libraries have operational units which amount to specialties within librarianship: reference, technical services, special collections, digital initiatives, etc. And those operational units can also have specialties within them. They can encourage efficiency and consistency of services by allowing the “experts” to deal with specific problems in that area. However, they *are* silos, meaning barriers or dividing lines; each has its own culture, goals, and often, terminology. When silos must exist for efficiency, adequate communication, knowledge, and understanding between them is absolutely necessary in order to address common activities or concerns. Also, sometimes the breaking down of operational silos is less possible, if the library is part of a larger organization with its own structure and regulations to which the library is beholden. Effective leaders understand when operational silos must exist for efficiency and when they can or should be broken down for communication’s sake.

Two good examples of how to break down operational silos in libraries come to mind. In the past, positions for “renaissance librarians,” or those who had tasks in both public and

technical services, seemed to result in removal of silos in those two areas. The idea was that the two sides of the coin would inform each other. Another example is the “solo librarian” who works in a very small library and does everything (perhaps with one or two support staff). Both are able to eliminate silos for their own jobs and personal workplaces. They are more likely to see the connections between different operational areas. Also, current positions being advertised often include one or more facets that cross or combine traditional operational silos, and while these more often reflect changes in libraries’ needs overall, they are also ways to encourage the cross-pollination and collaboration of different types of library work and allow for growth in each one. Other examples of breaking down operational silos include establishing cross-functional teams, encouraging job sharing between functional units, having unit managers work together on specific problems across an organization, and establishing collaboration as a shared organizational value. For example, a newly reorganized unit could put together cross-functional teams or arrange job-sharing opportunities in order to make work in the new unit more efficient and to build camaraderie and positive morale among members of the new unit. Practices like these go a long way towards building employee engagement, eliminating silos, and fostering resiliency where it is perhaps most needed.

### **Best Practices for Leaders**

As stated before, there is little in the literature that directly concerns how best to encourage resilience in libraries specifically. However, there are some things that could possibly become “best practices” for leaders to encourage resilience within their organizations:

*Use existing technological solutions and HR processes to hire new employees who demonstrated resilience in previous positions.*

Some organizations use online programs to survey references during the hiring process. One of these is called SkillSurvey, which provides a variety of reference surveys for different types of jobs. For example, there is a template for “general professional,” one for “executive assistant,” and others for other types of positions. In several of these surveys, the question “Remain flexible and adapt to variety on the job (e. g., effectively handle unexpected situations and changing conditions)?” appears (K. Snider, personal communication, May 19, 2017). References then have the opportunity to rate a job candidate on this behavior. Even though this question does not contain the word “resilience,” it is asking for information on adaptability and response to change, and that could well indicate a candidate’s level of or potential for resilience.

In addition, hiring managers can screen at the interview level for evidence of resilience. For example, a hiring manager can ask open-ended questions during the interview to see if a candidate has experience dealing with change or adversity in both their professional or personal life and how they coped with it. Finding someone who can articulate their experience with having to be adaptable and coping effectively with change, but who receives high rankings in this area from references, is likely the most desirable candidate. The questions in the interview can also indicate the relative importance of the trait or experience to the hiring organization.

After recruitment and hiring, a supervisor can articulate the expectation of adaptability and build it into the performance management document or process if it is allowed. Giving employees the opportunity to demonstrate their adaptability and rewarding this behavior also adds to an employee’s arsenal of resilience habits. Employees can successfully demonstrate their adaptability by willingly taking on new assignments or duties, or even through coping successfully with the everyday ebb and flow that comes with working in the modern library organization. In addition, changes in organizational structure may require employees to take on

new responsibilities, learn new skills, or work with new or different supervisors. The need for new skills and abilities can also come from changes in focus, mission, or services. Leaders should discuss the quality of resilience and their expectations for it in the performance management process.

*Model resilience as a leader/manager/supervisor.*

In this strategy, the old bromide “Do as I say, not as I do” gets turned on its head; it becomes “Do as I do, not as I say.” Just as individual employees can work towards resilience, so can leaders. In this case, leaders and managers should be self-reflective enough to know their own capacity for resilience, and then be able to display it in interactions with employees. However, if this is not the case, there are many formal and informal resources available to help with developing personal resilience. For example, it may be possible to take a short sabbatical or set aside time to intentionally learn about the concept of resilience and how it can be used to improve organizations. Fostering the willingness to take on new challenges personally or professionally is also useful; new challenges can be reframed as growth experiences, and therefore build personal resiliency. In addition to helping leaders find their own personal resilience, these resources can be used in coaching employees who need or wish to improve.

*Break down silos between operational units or groups of employees, empowering others to do so, wherever possible.*

In libraries, silos are not only operational, as described above, but they can also exist based on individual personal qualities such as age, sex, race, education, status, or ability. Leaders should look for opportunities to foster dialogue between employees of differing perspectives. Often, a strategic planning initiative driven by a parent organization provides the perfect

opportunity for a leader to pull together employees from all over the library organization to create new strategic goals, new mission or vision statements, or new organizational values. Employees involved in such a project have the opportunity to work with people that they might otherwise have not been able to work with and gain perspective from them as well. Even if operational silos cannot and should not be eliminated, removing barriers to dialogue between different groups can help break down what silos can be broken down. Also, systemic silos, such as those related to different hiring/evaluation processes or benefits for employees of differing status within an organization, are difficult, if not impossible, to break down, unless there is widespread agreement in the larger organization that they should be. However, leaders should always take into account opinions held by employees of differing status and encourage employees to be part of a dialogue where varying opinions can be safely expressed. In this way, even if systemic silos cannot be broken down, individual viewpoints can be honored and people can find common ground. Organizational diversity plans or initiatives may facilitate this.

*Encourage cross-training and flexible distribution of job duties among operational units.*

Leaders should do this as well as they are able to, given the constraints imposed by parent organizations, restrictive regulations, or even restrictive attitudes. Allowing employees to learn about each other's jobs and even formally establishing job duties in common (through position descriptions) can contribute to a culture where resilience is valued and demonstrated. It is also the foundation for effective partnerships and collaboration between operational units. Such cross-functional activities can provide mutual support during difficult or changing times. Again, the camaraderie and respect built during cross-functional activities can build teamwork and morale and increase organizational and personal resiliency.

*In more tranquil times, provide organizational resilience assessment and training for employees.*

Resilience can be assessed in library organizations using a variety of benchmarks and tools. For example, the Resilient Organisations website provides several tools for measuring organizational resilience: the Benchmark Resilience Tool, which measures an organization's resilience and compares it to other organizations in the same or related industries; or the Employee Resilience Tool, which measures an individual employee's level based on self-assessment of their work attitudes. There are two free online surveys available at this site: the Resilience Thumbnail Tool and the Resilience Health Check.

In addition, the Workplace Resilience Inventory is available. A questionnaire developed by McLarnon and Rothstein at the University of Western Ontario for individuals, it measures employees' personal characteristics in the affective (emotional), behavioral, and cognitive domains. It consists of descriptive statements in each area, and participants are asked to rate themselves on a 5-point Likert scale (McLarnon and Rothstein, 2013).

Leaders and employees can use such surveys and tools to assess resiliency within their organizations. The results can be used to guide individuals and libraries in their professional development or strategic planning.

## **Summary**

According to Diane Coutu, "resilience is one of the great puzzles of human nature" (Coutu, 2002, p. 46). How it works in organizations, particularly libraries, is also a bit of a puzzle. However, there is much assistance available for library leaders to consult and take advantage of. Fostering personal and organizational resilience can lead to a more highly-functioning organization that is able to withstand stresses and even thrive in the face of them. Because of their already existing tendency towards establishing partnerships and collaborations

with the communities they serve, libraries are already moving towards resilience. However, challenges still remain: dealing with operational and systemic silos that prevent effective collaboration; knowing how to foster resilience in the face of a crisis; and thinking about how libraries can become truly resilient organizations, even within a parent organization with its own policies and procedures. Effective leaders recognize these challenges and work at overcoming them in order to strengthen individual and collective adaptability and flexibility that will build resiliency during changing times.

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