

**Organic (and a Little Mechanistic) Management Systems
and their Application at the Public Library**

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The public library is not an isolated organization but exists within a county government dedicated to providing and preserving information for the public. Because the library exists within a larger environment and needs to change with the demands generated within the community an organic management system would allow staff and managers to implement change more rapidly because input would come from more people rather than by a mechanistic management model that is more resistant to vary its practices and less able to change because input is limited to upper management. A flexible, open system is more responsive to its environment, thus is capable of addressing problems, adopting solutions and serving the end user's varied needs more quickly.

The organic organization is a "biological metaphor" describing an open system or open organization that responds to the larger environment and is both proactive and reactive to the demands from the larger environment. Input, output, technology, environment, goals, strategy, behaviors, processes, culture and structure can all be addressed in an open, organic management style if an organization chooses to. An organization that is closed, and unwilling to invite input is in danger of becoming static and then of dying, much like any living organism, thus the biological metaphor.

A characteristic of organic systems is the need for more loosely connected relationships of library staff. Traditionally, the public library has operated under a horizontal, top-down management model where "best practices" and "we know what's best for the user" structure thrived. There was no connection to the environment in this model. Even if there was a realization that change must happen bureaucratic systems that were in place could not keep up with change since decisions were made too slowly and were not responsive to the needs of the end user because the end user was not consulted.

New traditions have begun to take shape in library management with open, organic systems which brought about vertical management structures that invites input from more staff allowing them to not only become part of the environment but to serve the larger environment, i.e. the end user. This results in a library that provides patrons with services they want and supports the ultimate goal of sustained use.

In Weick's paper "Educational Organization as Loosely Coupled Systems" he says that by implementing more loosely coupled organic systems an organization can benefit from more environmental influence and therefore can more readily adapt input, output and diversity for the end user. For example, many public libraries have started movie nights, knitting groups, opened coffee counters, developed teen lounges, "Singles Read" books clubs, a "Cult Classics" and "Criterion Collection" section for DVD rentals, partnered with local art organizations to showcase artwork and host "art openings", opened the library to diabetes and Alzheimer's support groups, and, finally, put in large, comfortable sofas in response to patrons demands. These examples of input/output demonstrate response in an environment.

In Professor Hussey's lectures and on the Discussion Board she stated that, "employees at the library could identify with the culture of the library and ascertain acceptable behaviors and processes when part of organic systems". This means the employee is now part of an open system and plays a larger role in designing and implementing the change the public wants from the library. This provides a moral boost and supports the feeling of contributing to the greater good of an improved system, i.e. interconnectedness.

In many libraries it is difficult for managers to shift to an organic management system if they have been in a closed, mechanistic system that has endured limited change. Hierarchical management has a long tradition in public libraries. In many counties public libraries did not pay

attention to their patron, and by not doing so many did not see the environment change, they blocked the end user-the patron. If a library does not operate like it is part of a larger environment it will miss the changes that are happening. Isolated, closed management is sometimes unwilling to adapt to change. This goes against a public library's ultimate goal of serving and preserving information for users-- in the way the user wants it.

Another potential pitfall of working in an open system was mentioned by Professor Hussey on the Discussion Board where she states, "With systems you are looking at how the individual parts work together to create the organization. It's how it all works together that makes it successful or not." In other words, change can be implemented but it may not always be for the good of the organization. If this should happen, stick with your model of an open system. If you and your library staff were able to make change happen in the first place simply be ready to adjust to make it happen again in the event of a failure.

While increased decentralization in a library is good and results in change happening more quickly, some mechanized management systems should remain within the library for it to run smoothly. Not every division of a library needs to run in an open, organic system with need for input. For example, a payroll administrator does not need to change as public demand changes. Sometimes a "one best way" works and is the most efficient way to do things.

It is also important for libraries to understand that while implementing change, staff and management must be willing to make adjustments. Change comes hard for more than just managers. Communication from management and updates on change will quash rumors and smooth anxious souls. Not everyone is happy to be invited into the mix. Certain staff will not feel comfortable providing input. Encourage staff, but do not push staff members for embrace the new model immediately. They will come around eventually.

On reason the Organic Management Model is needed now more than ever is because the virtual library is on the rise. Currently many special libraries in the corporate world respond to user demands electronically. This virtual universe changes the very understanding of how a library serves. It is not necessarily a physical structure in which one enters to access information. A special librarian, or any librarian must be able to serve in a loosely connected system where he/she can make decisions to help the end user and still be part of a team. Our textbooks uses the terms, “virtual, boundaryless and networked” to describe the “new type organizational structure that is geographically dispersed”. A high-functioning, organic, open management systems librarian will operate well in this developing universe.

Finally, the Organic Management model will work in the library because it meets the goal of more quickly responding to patrons demands and, over time, it will more closely match the management model that incoming staff have come to expect from a modern workplace-a horizontal management model where their input is expected, valued, needed and implemented.

References

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