

From Independence to Interdependence: Shifting Organizational Cultures

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The world finished for me on the day my Nautilus dived beneath the water for the first time. That day I bought my last books, my last magazines, my last newspapers, and I would like to believe that humanity has thought or written nothing since then.

–Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (Captain Nemo to Dr. Aronnax)

Captain Nemo closed the hatch not only on the *Nautilus* but also on the very possibility that the human species would produce anything of any consequence beyond the day when he took his ship into the sea. The attempted *in-dependence* of Captain Nemo could be seen as folly even in the nineteenth century—he appears to have been the ultimate resister of change! In contrast, today, the *inter-dependence* of individuals and institutions carries with it an urgency equal to Captain Nemo's, but with a realization of the critical nature of shared problem solving in this complex and intellectually accumulating world.

At one time, libraries may have had the insular perspective of Captain Nemo—collecting for themselves and for their immediate "universes." Now, however, libraries are working to alter their individual and collective cultures for compelling reasons. Paramount among these reasons is the realization that user access to the world's cultural and intellectual products is vulnerable if we rely solely on long-standing assumptions regarding our ability to build local library collections that are largely self-sufficient.

In spite of the fact that we have come to some sense of the need for broadened access and cooperative collection development, libraries struggle to change their internal cultures and struggle to develop understanding within their institutions' broader culture of the benefits of shared collections and services. Over the last twenty years of discussion and modest movement toward cooperative collection development, the discourse was dominated by a tension between investing resources to amass broad and deep local collections versus the budgetary realities in a world of constrained resources. This tension was fed from many directions. Overall, however, it was the practical and political difficulties of providing local library users with access to remote collections (be they located across town or across a continent or ocean) that loomed large, and with a few notable exceptions, restricted library initiatives effecting cooperative collection development to modest proportions. Dependence on remote collections is often resisted by the "organizational culture" of the library and of the institution of which the library is a part, a culture that by its very nature rallies to protect the status quo. Based on these experiences, assumptions may be implicitly made that extending cooperative collection development agreements "too far" toward dependency on another institution is at best risky and at worst threatening to institutional identity and pride.

How can this ingrained and, in some cases, strategically conservative culture effectively *adapt* and *learn* while navigating an uncertain immediate and long-range future? In essence, how can the organizational culture of an institution such as an academic library change?

What is Organizational Culture?

What is the nature of organizational culture? Will a greater understanding of it help us to overcome some of the hurdles we face as we attempt to spark cultural paradigm changes in academic and research libraries? The concepts of social scientist and organizational behavior expert Edgar Schein help to answer these questions. Schein created a lasting definition of organizational culture in his seminal article *Coming to a New Awareness of Organizational Culture*:

Organizational culture is the *pattern of basic assumptions* that a given group has *invented, discovered or developed* in learning to cope with its *problems of external adaptation and internal integration*, and that have *worked well enough to be considered valid*, and, therefore, to be *taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel* in relation to those problems.¹ (Italics his.)

In each piece of this definition lie the clues to how people in organizations work together both to protect and perpetuate the culture of the status quo. If we dissect Schein's definition and apply it to the world of libraries and specifically to the world of collection building, we may be able to see how the self-preserving dynamic of organizational cultures operates.

A *pattern of basic assumptions* means an understood set of assumptions—the assumptions are implicit not explicit. They are operationalized values and belief systems in that they drive choice, behavior, and actions within the organization. We need such patterns so that we don't have to invent approaches to situations every few seconds. So, in relation to collection building, we have seen a pattern of assumptions surrounding what it means to be a "complete" library, a relevant and even a practical library; what it means to collect for future generations; what kind of collecting is valued most at any given time; etc. These assumptions have defined research library collections and what they have to offer to the institutions and societies of which they are a part.

As Schein points out, patterns of assumptions, such as the ones we have known in libraries, did not just appear—they were *invented, discovered, or were developed* by us and others who were in our libraries, our professions, and our universities before us. So, after the establishment of the first monastic order, the first university, and after the invention of the Gutenberg press, the concept of a duplicable text or record of human thought was invented. Not only did this new capability to have the same text in many places at once serve society in immediate socio-political terms, it signaled that it was possible to be in-dependent of the one location where the one text used to reside. In fact, it was possible to create multiple representations of scholarly and nonscholarly texts all over the globe. This new concept was made possible by both discovery and invention and then perfected through the development of faster presses, better paper, shipping, etc. Here began a pattern of assumptions: not to be dependent on remote places, to have all within reach—this was now assumed to be a "good" thing, a signal of social health for an individual or scholarly community to build a library collection.

By inventing and discovering these new ways of interacting with the output of human thought, we were working toward *external adaptation and internal integration*. We were externally adapting to an environment in which it was not only inconvenient to hang on to old ways of doing things—riding a donkey for miles to the nearest monastic library to read a copy of Aristotle's *Poetics*, for example—it was also critical to work within a newly forming social norm: that of local education and the belief that owning and amassing books was both good and a mark of intelligence (both personally and institutionally). We were internally integrating new discoveries into our daily lives and adjusting our values and beliefs to accommodate the new.

Thus we arrived at a point in more recent history where these new values and beliefs underlying the pattern of assumptions *worked well enough to be considered valid*. It became impossible to consider a great (or even minor) university without a library—preferably a comprehensive one. To maintain this cultural norm meant we had to admit little to no questioning of our assumed beliefs, values, and patterns of behavior around what a library was, what a library ought to hold, and what was required to make a library great.

This led to the need, desire, and organizational imperative to *teach these patterns of assumptions to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel*. This is neither a judgmental statement nor a

pejorative one—it is merely a neutral fact of organizational behavior. From a logical perspective this teaching of new people joining the organization makes great sense—it is, in fact, an acculturation process that allows the organization to continue to do what it has always done and what is expected and demanded of it.

It appears, then, that the culture of the organizations we call libraries is a very old pattern indeed and that it has functioned and served well or it would have been eclipsed or replaced much earlier. Now we are discovering, inventing, and developing new ways of viewing the world and the roles of ourselves and libraries in it. This has caused a seismic shift in our perspective of what is a useful pattern of assumptions in relation to our age. The concept of libraries as collections of artifacts held in one place for a particular, largely local set of constituencies, though still powerful and valid, is being tested as we are reminded of our inter-dependence and the impossibility of a future of institutional and organizational in-dependence.

This is not to suggest that we are at the point of tossing out the whole pattern of assumptions we have operated on for centuries but that that pattern is being painfully and thoroughly investigated by none other than ourselves. We have been driven to this act of investigation and exploration—which is, in turn, leading to new discoveries and adjustments to our patterns of assumptions—by what is known as *disconfirming evidence*, i.e., evidence that tells us our stalwart pattern of assumptions will no longer hold without some adjustment. We come upon this disconfirming evidence almost everywhere we turn (although each of us "sees" and assimilates its significance on our own timetable, making for heated and emotional debates on the need for any change). The evidence comes by way of economic pressures and constraints, publishers' practices, changing patterns of scholarly communication, new user demands, remarkable advances in technology, and—I personally hope—by our own internal urge to explore our curiosity about what different assumptions could lead to for our users.

It is clear that we have moved beyond the now almost quaint "ownership vs. access" discussion to an examination of how we might make strategic choices about building collections in order to develop our inter-dependencies to the benefit of current and future users. Our pattern of assumptions has shifted from one collection sufficient unto itself to a pattern that crafts an inter-dependent network of collections for the good of the user.

Earlier in this issue of *ARL*, Deborah Jakubs describes the AAU/ARL Global Resources Program as a microcosm of the array of new challenges confronting research libraries, challenges not unique to managing collections of foreign language resources. In this context, she questions what it means in the current environment to "build a collection" and then articulates a new vision

*of collections as a wide array of resources, some held locally but many found elsewhere—even outside North America—and not necessarily in libraries or in print form. We do not need to own the physical object to consider it part of our "collection."*²

For some readers, those who have witnessed some form of *disconfirming evidence*, this may strike them as an obvious statement of the new reality. For others, it may be an explicit statement that expresses an intuitive hunch that had not yet been fully assimilated in their own thinking or plans. And for yet others, such a statement may represent an unthinkable course of action. Among the people using libraries and those working in libraries and in the institutions they serve, there is a broad spectrum of readiness for change. That spectrum is narrowing as more people gain experience from projects testing the new environment.

In this context of trying to shift established organizational cultures within libraries and their institutions, the regional projects of the AAU/ARL Global Resources Program may be viewed as opportunities to accelerate the acceptance of change. For example, by demonstrating strategies that make collection inter-

dependence *work well enough to be considered valid*, some of the hurdles presented by the "old" organizational culture can be overcome. The more people who gain experience that convincingly demonstrates the workability of new models of cooperation both within and among institutions, the faster the lessons learned from these projects may be institutionalized.

Evaluations of individual project experiences also present opportunities for the assessment of new models of cooperation within an organizational culture. Importantly, the report of the Association of American Universities' Task Force on the Acquisition and Distribution of Foreign Language and Area Studies Materials proposed four broad points to be considered when measuring progress toward achieving the overall goals of a comprehensive collaborative program of foreign acquisitions.³ The recommended goals are:

- Research libraries in North America have restored and are maintaining acquisitions of foreign materials at levels adequate to North American needs.
- Significant progress has been made in assuring effective and timely access to and delivery of foreign research materials. Specifically, campus networks and their electronic infrastructures have been developed sufficiently to support selective electronic resource sharing and that interlibrary loan services have been modernized.
- The projects have developed realistic financial strategies that incorporate reallocation as a central funding source.
- Foreign area specialists and other faculty who routinely rely upon foreign language materials have become convinced that the program is producing improved access. The impact on users is a critical factor.

By proposing evaluation measures at this broad level, the AAU Task Force helped to define the scope of the Global Resources Program as a strategic operation with opportunities—and hurdles—that reach far beyond the library and have implications for the culture of the institution as a whole.

The twenty-first century promises to be a time of increased global collaboration among all kinds of institutions; consequently, many individuals will need more effective access to worldwide information resources. By working together in the Global Resources Program to respond to global needs for improved information discovery and exchange of knowledge, libraries are furthering their mission of providing foreign language content for coming generations. They are also contributing to reshaping the organizational culture of the research institutions that support the arts, sciences, and humanities.

Endnotes

1. Edgar Schein, "Coming to a New Awareness of Organizational Culture" in *Sloan Management Review* 26 (winter 1984): 3-16.
 2. [Deborah Jakubs, "The AAU/ARL Global Resources Program: Both Macrocosm and Microcosm" in *ARL: A Bimonthly Report on Research Library Issues and Actions from ARL, CNI, and SPARC* no. 206 \(Oct. 1999\): 1-7.](#)
 3. Association of American Universities Research Libraries Project and Association of Research Libraries, *Reports of the AAU Task Forces* (Washington: ARL, 1994), 27.
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