

# Hot Groups: A Living Source of Organizational Agility

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The quest for organizational agility in libraries has taken on a powerful sense of urgency and importance. The feeling, if not the reality, of rapid changes in the internal and external environments of higher education and the need to respond to those changes have induced this focus on agility. Yet many libraries feel that agility is as far out of their institutional reach as dancing would be for a hippopotamus. Nevertheless, research libraries have sought strategies to create organizational agility. Examples of these are shortened timelines for strategic plans, cross-organizational work projects and processes, new communication patterns and technologies, and new organizational structures. While these strategies may be steps towards increased agility, they often seem to be incomplete in answer to the quest.

## Hot Groups: A Hidden Source of Agility

While agility might be something most libraries need to learn and develop as a way of meeting challenges, I would like to suggest that one source of agility already exists in most libraries and that it needs only to be recognized and encouraged. That source is what is known as a *hot group*, a term coined by Harold Leavitt and Jean Lipman-Blumen, organizational development experts, in their 1995 *Harvard Business Review* article, "Hot Groups."<sup>1</sup> In their newly released book of the same title, Lipman-Blumen and Leavitt go into greater depth on the special nature of hot groups: "A hot group is a state of mind. It's not a name for some new kind of team or task force or committee. The hot group state of mind is task-obsessed and full of passion. It is always coupled with a distinctive way of behaving, a style that is intense, sharply focused, and full-bore."<sup>2</sup> Thus the authors describe at the outset of their book the basic idea behind the term *hot group*.

We need only reflect on our own individual experiences to identify at least one instance where we were part of a group that was "clicking" – that was focused and impassioned about its task or work, that seemed to exist in a world of its own – to realize that hot groups are a fact of organizational life. We just didn't have a name for this phenomenon until now, and we certainly have not learned to exploit the possibility of hot groups in our heightened need for agility. In part, this is because of the curious and seemingly serendipitous nature of hot groups: we never know, nor can we control, when they are going to spring to life.

## Examples of Hot Groups in Libraries

In a December 1995 article, Katherine Haskins and I described the experience of a group of people at the University of Chicago Library brought together by the urgent and overwhelming task of designing effective means to train all staff and users in a new integrated system.<sup>3</sup> The turnaround time at the University of Chicago was very short and so a group of 24 people selected to train the others how to use the new system was put together and received special training provided by the ARL/OLMS's *Training Skills Institute for Implementing an Integrated Library System*. In our article, we describe that group of trainers as a "hot group" because, in spite of the fact that these individuals came from all levels and areas of the library, the task before them drew them into a tightly knit, high-performing unit within days. Although the University of Chicago was a particularly vivid example of this phenomenon, these groups

exist in many libraries and I believe them to be one of the most viable and energetic responses to the organizational need for agility.

More recently, the Instructional Support Services group at the Southern Illinois University-Carbondale library helped the OLMS develop its inaugural distance learning program, the Online Lyceum.<sup>4</sup> This group of nine people – five from SIU and four ARL staff – had the unique and driven focus of a hot group. Although the full group worked remotely – with members in Carbondale, Washington, D.C., Evanston, and San Diego – the group still had the mark of a hot group: organized loosely by two driven leaders, it brought unique and differing talents together to accomplish work, innovated, engaged in continuous creative problem-solving, and did all this on an exceedingly tight deadline. Further, the group accomplished this without the more common trappings of an organizational structure, such as reporting to others, being limited by bureaucratic policies and procedures, etc. The group worked to produce one of the most innovative ARL products to date.

In many libraries, groups coalesce around both small and large projects. However, not all teams, committees, and working groups become hot groups. In fact, Lipman-Blumen and Leavitt suggest that standard types of organizational groups – such as departments, teams, and committees – rarely become hot groups. Nonetheless, it is clear that, if the conditions are right, any group can become "hot."

### **What Makes Hot Groups Different?**

What makes hot groups different from other competent and task-oriented groups in the library? Lipman-Blumen and Leavitt describe some characteristics of the hot groups they used as examples of this phenomenon:

- Each group felt itself engaged in an important – even vital – and personally ennobling mission.
- In each, the task itself dominated all other considerations. The process was simultaneously arduous and intoxicating. Contrary to some fundamental tenets of organization development theory, interpersonal relationships played only secondary roles.
- All the groups were relatively short-lived (hot groups tend to organize around finite tasks or objectives), yet their participants remember the involvement nostalgically and in considerable detail.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, the hot group concept dovetails nicely with work done on creativity and innovation by Robert Grudin, professor emeritus of the University of Oregon.<sup>6</sup> Grudin's research shows that true innovation and creativity result not only from inspiration but also require an individual or individuals to have deep expertise and knowledge in the area within which they are working. Grudin refers to individuals and groups that are discoverers of the "new" as being *habitually attuned* to a specific realm and having mastery over their own methods. Individuals or groups are more likely to be playful with a subject about which they feel little anxiety. Their expertise allows them to depart more easily from the known, spot disconfirming information and oddities, and to discover new ways of doing things. There is every reason to believe that hot groups, then, will be creative and resourceful in ways that are

not reproducible.

It is precisely this irreproducibility of performance that makes hot groups so intriguing – each one is *sui generis*. This may test the patience of some administrators and leaders who prefer more control over how and when high performance occurs. However, to take full advantage of the hot group, leaders will need to develop ways to encourage this unique type of group to form and to manage itself in its own way.

### **Managing the Hot Group**

To be sure, there may be specific problems that arise when hot groups are in existence: jealousy or rivalry on the part of others outside the group; hot group obsession to the point of diminishing returns; and difficulties in managing individuals from different areas of the library when they are in a hot group. Hot groups engage in play and antics as well as often develop their own private lingo and communication style. They often appear to others in the organization as oblivious and even uncaring as they relentlessly pursue something in a manner that is opaque to "outsiders." In their book, Lipman-Blumen and Leavitt more fully describe some of the pitfalls and some of the possible ways of dealing with these pitfalls.

While there is no question that hot groups can be tricky to contain, it is clear from Lipman-Blumen and Leavitt's research that tolerating and even encouraging this state of mind is worthwhile because hot groups represent potential innovation, forward motion, productivity, and energy. While it is important to make accountability to the larger organization clear to hot groups, group members are likely to be very aware of the potential impact of their work while simultaneously having little regard for the bureaucratic rules that may stand in the way of how they manage their work.

Grudin believes that the political and diplomatic problems that often surround or tamp down creativity or innovation result from fear of threat to stability. Because there is power in creativity, the threat to organizational stability that "power newborn"<sup>7</sup> represents is often enough to squelch the group's project or product. For this reason, members of the organization need to be educated to understand different types of power and sources of innovation. To foster the growth of hot groups, organizational leaders must "Make room for spontaneity; encourage intellectual intensity, integrity, and exchange; value truth and the speaking of it; help break down barriers; select talented people and respect their self-motivation and ability; and use information technology to help build relationships, not just manage information."<sup>8</sup> Further, to take full advantage of the extraordinary agility that these groups can lend an organization, leaders need to be alert to the possibility of a hot group coalescing around a problem or task and then remove themselves and any bureaucratic impediments out of the group's way. If it seems that hot groups contribute to organizational turbulence, maybe we should consider that perhaps the best answer to volatility in our environment is fluidity and action-orientation in the way we work. We have much to learn from the way hot groups attack work, problem-solve, innovate, and think together.

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The ARL/OLMS will offer its *Edgework Institute: Stimulating Innovation in Libraries and*

*Information Services* in Washington, D.C., November 10–12. As part of that Institute, participants will explore the concept of hot groups as well as learn more about the politics and diplomacy of innovation.

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## Endnotes

1. Jean Lipman-Blumen, and Harold J. Leavitt, "Hot Groups," *Harvard Business Review* 73.4 (July 1995): 109.
2. Jean Lipman-Bluman, and Harold J. Leavitt, *Hot Groups: Seeding Them, Feeding Them, and Using Them to Ignite Your Organization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
3. Kathryn J. Deiss, and Katherine Haskins, "Training Technology Trainers: Training at the University of Chicago Library," *ARL: A Bimonthly Newsletter of Research Library Issues and Actions* 183 (Dec. 1995): 10-11. Also available at <http://www.arl.org/newsltr/183toc.html>.
4. See <http://www.arl.org/training/lyceum.html>.
5. Lipman-Blumne and Leavitt, *Hot Groups*.
6. Robert Grudin, *The Grace of Great Things: Creativity and Innovation* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1990).
7. Ibid.
8. Lipman-Blumen and Leavitt, "Hot Groups," *Harvard Business Review*.

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