
When Change Becomes the Constant and Time the Variable Becoming Resilient To Change

By Edward Klee and John Philip

Historically the public library has been part of every community and its existence—a landmark. The bookmobile has also been part of that history. Their services have had few if any rivals, and funding, though limited, provided sustinment. Today the public library and bookmobile are faced with new challenges. Challenges that make us review and learn from our past but also to look to the future.

The purpose of this article is to share what we see as challenges to bookmobile and public library service, to share what library practitioners can learn from the past, and to raise critical issues for surviving the future. We have identified four challenges facing bookmobile/extension and public library services today and into the future. They are:

- Challenge #1 The Library Organization and Employees Must Become More Flexible
- Challenge #2 Emerging Competition for Funds and Customers Are Redefining Existing Services
- Challenge #3 Libraries Services Have Direct Competitors
- Challenge #4 Libraries Services Must be Aligned With Its Mission

Lessons We Can Learn From The Past

The Library Organization and Employees Must Become More Flexible

This challenge is not a new challenge to the bookmobile program and public library, but is becoming a greater concern. The challenge to become more flexible is modeled by bookmobile and extension service. The staff of no department of any Public Library is more flexible than its extension and outreach staff. No other department faces a greater variety of environmental challenges, patron behaviors, limited resources, staff, personal space, even limited toilet access, and safety. These behaviors of resiliency are critical factors for the future.

Emerging Competition for Funds and Customers Are Redefining Existing Services

The challenge of emerging competition for funds and customers is an internal as well as an external factor. A potential casualty are bookmobile and extension services. If statistics or politics do not protect an outreach service, its advocates better be cautioned. A less than highly productive/effective outreach program is particularly susceptible to attack. It can be a target of its own management or a higher level of governmental administrative sharpshooters who observe what too often appears to be an anomaly better belonging in the past. This perspective is reinforced if actual or even apparent ineffectiveness is observed.

To add to the problem, administrators have an observed tendency to not review extension programs with as much perspicacity and objectivity as they would, for example, reference service. The bookmobile is most likely to be victimized by program cutters. The reason for this is not difficult to outline. The bookmobile by definition requires an expensive vehicle to be replaced at least once every ten to fifteen years. Outreach services are also easier to attack. Its constituencies are dispersed and often not motivated to politically defend their service if threatened.

Libraries Services Have Direct Competitors

Libraries do have direct competitors. Ironically for bookmobile services, other services are modeling their services after the bookmobile. Although the population has become more mobile, home delivery is becoming a popular commodity. In addition to the bookmobile, mobile businesses deliver a variety of services. Delivery services include the delivery of dog grooming, veterinary service, ice cream, pizza, tools, and a variety of mail services. Many of the successful programs initiated by the public library can also be found in a variety of settings. The children's story hour can now be found at bookstores, day care centers, church-related activities and summer day camps. Author receptions are found at book stores, book fairs, and fund raisers. Books, talking books, and videos are checked out from businesses ranging from the Cracker Barrel, to state parks, to hotels.

Libraries Services Must be Aligned With Its Mission

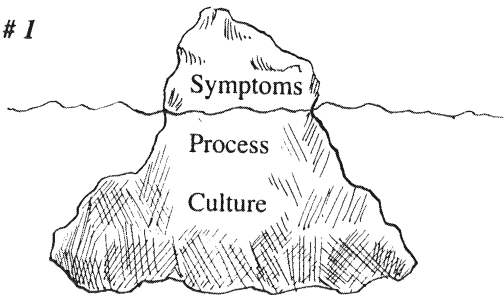
Today the public library has competitors in the delivery of services, but also competition for the same funding. The delivery of basic services,

including drinking water, adequate roads, schools, and the disposal of water, is no longer receiving adequate funding. Those responsible for ensuring the delivery of these minimal services are looking at other resources for funds. Some have even looked at the public library's funding and have argued that the public library is not considered an essential service, and its funds should be used to support these basic services. The library is challenged to demonstrate it is as essential as these basic services. This issue makes it very critical for the library community to know and expect a service from the public library. The public should expect this service, and the service should be at an acceptable level, that the public will come to the library's defense if funding is threatened. How well do the library services match the needs of its customers? The closer the services match the needs of the patron makes the difference between apathy to active support. As with services, if the patron/customer is not satisfied, the person will go elsewhere to receive that expected service.

Confronted with these four challenges, the public library, its governing authority, its director, its managers, and its staff need to review their operation and services. What services and procedures were once effective may now be ineffective. We propose that the public needs to look much deeper into its organization to determine strategies for addressing these issues.

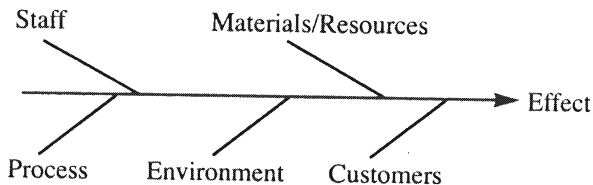
When confronted with a problem, we commonly attack it head on without looking deeper into why the problem exists. We refer to this as being the "treatment mode" instead of prevention. The problem may be resolved, but we argue it is only temporarily fixed, because we have only treated the symptom, not the problem. Treating symptoms keeps us in the treatment mode. It does not cure the problem. One may think of this as the "iceberg syndrome." You may recall the physical properties of the iceberg. What you see above the surface is compounded beneath the surface by what you don't see. If you are a captain of a ship, it's not what you see you need to worry about, it's what you don't see. So is our analogy of treating symptoms. If we continually treat the symptoms, we never cure the root problem—what we don't see. The symptoms not only let us know there is a deeper problem. We may need to look deeper into our procedures or deeper into our organizational culture to effectively make a change. The following graphic (Figure #1, p. 34) depicts our theory of problems and their levels.

Figure # 1



Dr. Edwards Deming and Dr. Joseph M. Juran have maintained since the early 50's that at least 85% of an organization's failures are the fault of management controlled systems. Workers can control fewer than 15% of the problems. The focus is on constant and rigorous improvement of every system, not on blaming individuals for the problems. Figure #2 shows different factors the library organization needs to consider in determining root causes.

Figure #2



The following exercise may help you determine if you are looking deep enough into the organization to determine the root cause of the problem. The diagram below contains a series of nine asterisks. Your challenge is to connect all nine asterisks without lifting your pen or pencil from the page. The answer will appear at the end of this article.



Did you notice your desire to stay within your imaginary lines? We feel administrators and managers do the same when looking at library services, procedures, and their administration. Our challenge to the library profession is to operate outside of the box and look from the outside in.

Externally and internally circumstances have changed. The first strategy for the administrator at each level of the library is to go back to the purpose of outreach and public library services for that service area, identify the needs of those being served and the methods to respond to those needs within its available resources. The challenge is to not get locked in the "box"! By looking at our problems and challenges from a different perspective, they may actually be opportunities.

Edward Klee is a trainer in the Government Services Center for Kentucky State University in Frankfort, Ky.

John Philip is a library service consultant in Westerville, Ohio.

(Answer to previous exercise)

