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# Reshaping library management in changing times



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Management restructures are seemingly a constant feature of organisational development. They are born of many factors: a new CEO or director wanting to fashion things differently and to achieve different ends or to realise their own vision for a service, or to make a mark or statement.

Our own case history had been a bit different. We had a proven structure which served our key goals and our customers well: by and large it delivered for us. The case for radical change had not been made, nor was there any need to find and embrace one.

## **DRIVERS FOR CHANGE**

Not unsurprisingly our external environment and service priorities were the key drivers and agents of change. By no means were our plans reactive: rather we scanned the organisational horizon and decided to make some changes before these became an absolute requirement.

We were faced with some clear and frankly stark 'knowns'. The first was the closure of a campus and the consequent need to integrate our art library collection and staff into our existing City Campus library space. The second, which came a little later in the planning phase, was the need for a significant cost saving.

The first meant that we had the opportunity to reframe the role of staff working in the art library. This was not so much a matter of choice as of necessity, to avoid unnecessary duplication of roles.

The requirement of cost savings also meant that we had to look seriously at our senior management resource. Because the sums involved were

large – we had already had to shrink our front-line staffing over several phases – and because the opportunity for review of the Senior Management Team (SMT) in the context of a library merger presented itself in parallel with the cost-saving agenda.

It would have been relatively easy to tweak the current service shape, make some savings and favour the status quo. However, the opportunity, while doubtless more challenging, potentially offered greater reward for the university, the service, our customers and staff. The key question we asked ourselves was: 'What are the university's strategic drivers that are shaping our business and our services now and for the future?'

From that point our thinking focused wholly on aligning any new structure with those drivers in a purposeful and highly visible manner. Our horizon and environmental scanning had identified a number of outputs:

- learning skills for students
- partners and partnerships
- staff development
- customer library experience
- promotion of collections as a central and valued part of the service offer

Having identified some drivers, and with a clear rationale for change, we faced the question: how could we blend them into an organisational structure, building on the skills and talents of the existing team?

## **RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGE**

Over the period prior to the restructure we had worked with the senior library team to offer project and secondment opportunities (in areas including learning skills and e-resources in partner centres) that resonated with the emerging institutional drivers. These projects pointed to the emerging themes while also shaping the future management landscape and resource priorities. The opportunities presented by the projects and secondments both encouraged new ways of working and thinking and helped to nurture some new working relationships and synergies.

Staff development has always been a priority for our staff and we have protected budgets to allow continued investment. Many of our managers have been trained in coaching techniques as well as in broader management development including, for example, resilience and influencing skills.

Such skills would be important when working in a less hierarchical management structure.

The identified drivers and our experience from the projects resulted in a new structure of six senior library roles. This achieved an overall reduction of two full-time equivalents by voluntary means; additionally, the deletion and redesignation of our former deputy site librarian roles based at different sites gave us a SMT which retained its original number and core strength. Considerable time and thought was given to the development and detailing of the roles and the defining of the relationships and dependencies between them. As West-Burnham comments, 'The move from control has to be demonstrated through a significant rethinking of how jobs are designed and defined'.<sup>1</sup>

The new roles are:

Quality and Marketing Manager  
Campus Library Manager (x2)  
Learning and Teaching Skills Manager  
E-resources and Collections Manager  
Partnerships and Staff Development Manager

#### **COMMUNICATION**

As a part of the restructure we gave time to ensure that the staff across the service were appropriately briefed on the changes and how they would affect their work. To ensure that the briefings were as effective as possible, we provided briefings written specifically for certain staff and held group meetings, allowing for questions and wider discussion. We also prepared individual communications for staff who could not attend and followed up with further email information.

#### **VALUES AND CULTURAL CHANGE**

Our new structure was not only based on new drivers and the need to redirect some of our staff resource. It was also predicated on a desire to introduce a new way of working within the SMT and the service as a whole. The new model centres on shared responsibility and co-dependency.

Niether of these concepts was new to us – indeed, they can be considered essential to successful service delivery. The whole of our converged service Student and Learning Support has been built around a shared culture, supported by five core shared service values:

- teamwork
- information sharing
- customer focus
- customer satisfaction
- continuous improvement

The foundations of the new service shape had been laid, with team work, information sharing and continuous improvement being particularly relevant. However, our new library structure specifically and intentionally embraced shared responsibility and co-dependency as founding cornerstones – they were part of the fabric of the new design.

#### **PERCEIVED BENEFITS**

This was a complex but also a sophisticated approach and we believed that the benefits would prove worthwhile and could further our process of cultural change: 'When organizations succeed with matrix structures, significant positive outcomes usually result from employees sharing ideas and resources out of silos... New relationships are built, employees acquire new skills, and organizational performance improves.'<sup>2</sup>

The new structure moved away from what had been a relatively successful hierarchical model (Fig. 1) in which we had worked hard to ease the rigidity of the structural model to encourage shared responsibility and creativity across the service. The new approach is not by any definition a 'matrix' model approach; for example, it does not rely on the creation of project teams / managers to deliver core functions. It perhaps shares some matrix style characteristics, notably the valuing of flexibility and the free flow of information, but this was distinctly not the application of a theoretical model to a service. Rather, our thinking was born in response to and in anticipation of the changing higher education landscape.

The revised structure (Fig. 2) is demanding, in that it brings both some specific and some shared responsibilities for our managers – depending on the role of the particular member of staff in relation to those at managerial level. For example, an academic liaison librarian might report to one SMT member for faculty liaison matters and to another for aspects of their role which support campus service delivery; particular collaboration may be required in areas such as collection development, skills delivery and services for partner centre students. Overall the new shape creates dependencies between each member of SMT and each 'portfolio' of work and allows greater

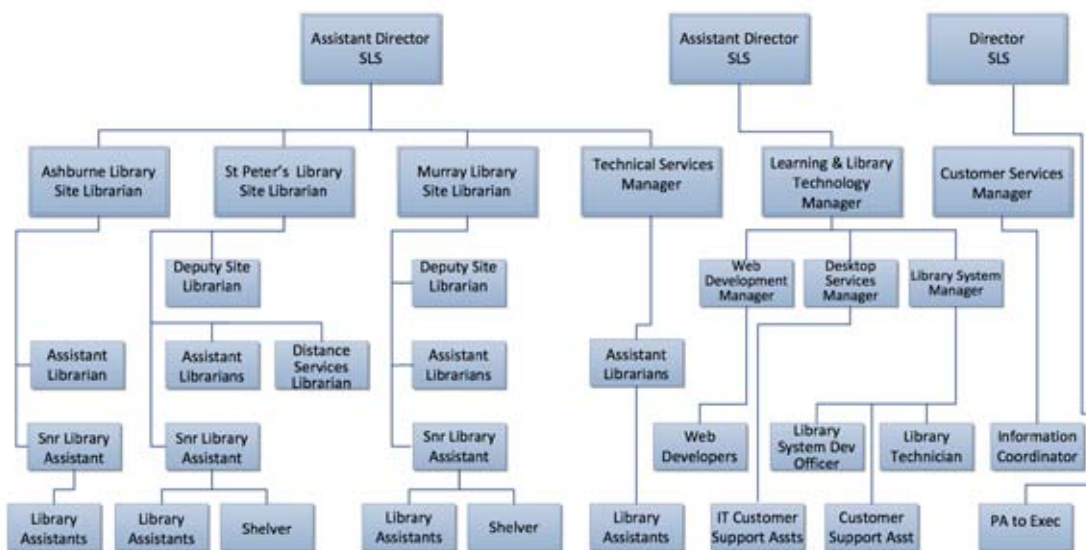


Fig. 1. University of Sunderland library structure before 'reshape'

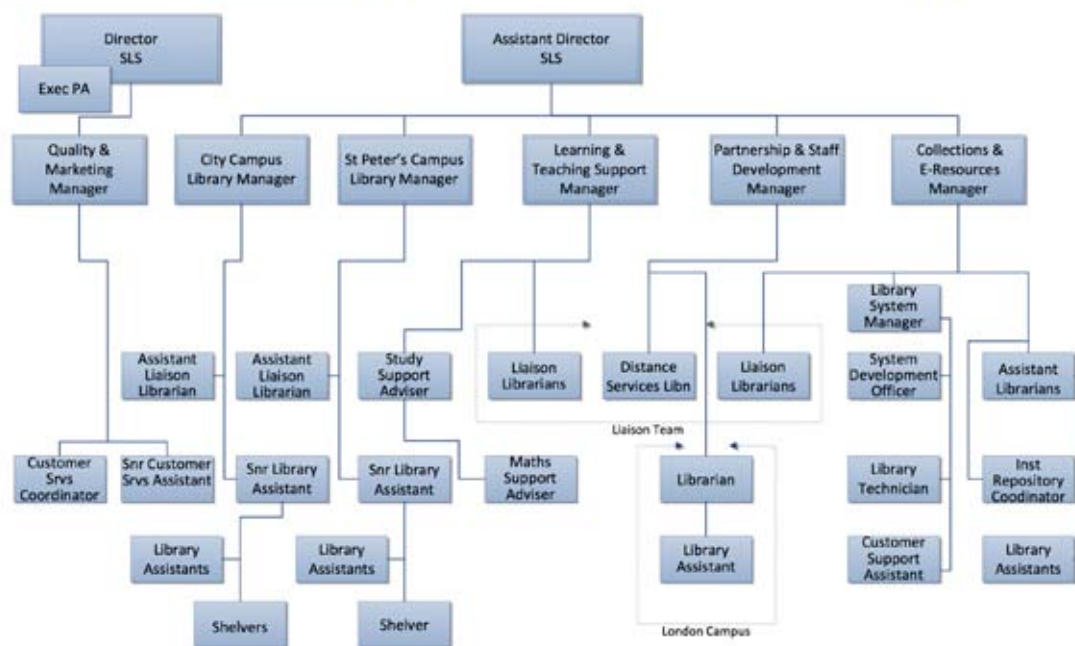


Fig. 2. University of Sunderland Library Structure after 'reshape'

flexibility between teams, encouraging both local ownership and creativity.

The whole depends and trades upon the ability of all our staff to work flexibly and in professional relationships. In the end the structure itself resolves little – it is the way our staff work that achieves the benefits. There are of course

risks here – not least, potential confusion about line management. However, there has been little reported or significant evidence of this to date.

The early indications are that the opportunity to use greater flexibility and capitalise on staff creativity is coming to the fore. This is possibly most marked within the SMT itself, where managers have embraced new roles with considerable

energy and skill. Together they are delivering on their individual responsibilities while also operating in a wider collaborative context, aware of their shared responsibilities and dependencies. Some early outcomes are that the opportunity for progressing common approaches across our campuses has been accelerated and that in more than one area, role holders are seeking greater collaboration across our wider converged service and beyond.

#### **LIBERATED LEADERSHIP**

Our model is deliberately designed and styled as co-dependency that builds on how we already work as a service while incorporating co-dependency into a formal management structure. Critical to this is the concept of liberated leadership for members of the directorate and SMT and beyond. One of our associated service initiatives has been to devolve leadership responsibility throughout the service organisation while seeking to skill people to feel comfortable in that culture. This work continues, with the aim of unlocking both potential and energy to create a service which enjoys 'a climate of trust, empowerment and stability by devolving authority and responsibility and harness the latent talent within its walls'.<sup>3</sup>

The structure relies on the same increased delegated responsibility and in areas of increasing strategic importance to the service. This has meant some 'letting go' for all of us and a redefining of some of the boundaries to our earlier field of operation. This has not always been easy but it is furthering the practice of a liberating climate which can foster creativity. West-Burnham observed, in the context of the school learning environment:

An organisation that is focused on learning and shared leadership clearly needs a different structure to one that is based on control. The classic hierarchy, with its levels of authority and responsibility often limited with line management and the chain of command, is probably the least appropriate structure for an educational organisation.<sup>4</sup>

#### **CONCLUSION**

The new structure has been fully and formally in place for around eight months. Early indications are that it is working well. This is thanks to the talents and skills of those in key management roles, who have understood and embraced the new approach and are committed to making it

work well. We are still in the early stages of this new experience and shall continue to embrace the learning that results, ever mindful of the benefits we can achieve for our many service users and for our staff.

This continues to be a challenging and energising learning experience for us all as individuals, teams and as a library organisation. We are happy to discuss and share that experience further with colleagues and senior teams across the sector.

#### **NOTES**

- 1 West-Burnham, J. *Building leadership capacity – helping leaders learn*, National College for Schools Leadership: Nottingham (2004), p. 4
- 2 North, M., & C. Coors, 'Avoiding death by dotted line', *Healthcare financial management*, January 2010, pp. 120–121
- 3 Turner, D, (1998), in McCaffery, P, *The higher education manager's handbook*, Routledge-Falmer: Abingdon (2004)
- 4 West-Burnham, p. 4