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### Making Change Happen in the Middle (Approaches to Innovation for Library Middle Managers)

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## MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN IN THE MIDDLE

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*By Robert Farrell*

**A**bstract: This paper seeks to provide library managers with a theoretical framework for thinking about how change is effected by those in middle management positions. Starting from the principles that change takes place within socio-culturally bounded contexts and is most successful when approached indirectly, two scenarios characteristic of many situations requiring change middle managers commonly face are then put forward. Following each scenario, a possible solution or path towards change is advanced in order to provide the reader with models for putting into practice the theoretical ideas presented. A methodology that combines theoretical frameworks and practical scenarios is adopted in order to ground theory in practice and thereby lead readers toward what might be called a “praxis” of change making.

### Introduction

It is no longer enough for middle managers to demonstrate competence in the traditional management areas of “planning, directing, organizing, and controlling the activities of their areas of responsibility” (Gilley 2005, 49). Today’s library directors, in line with contemporary management practices, increasingly demand that their middle managers become “change leaders”—individuals capable of identifying trends in the field or problems on the horizon and envisioning and implementing innovative responses and solutions (Gilley 2005). But how, from positions of marginal power, are library middle managers able to respond to this call?

A number of factors have led to these new expectations for middle managers. Libraries have followed the historical trend towards “shared leadership” within their organizations, a leadership structure that emphasizes bottom-up strategic planning and goal setting processes, and places responsibility for practical execution on those who manage the specific units to which goals correspond (Cawthorne 2010). Second, libraries are positioned at the center of rapidly changing political, economic, and technological circumstances. Public, school, academic, and special libraries, particularly those within corporations and government, must cope with increasingly unstable budgets, pressures to increase efficiency, and the changing landscape of digital information access and consumption. Phrases such as “culture of innovation” and “dynamic organization” have become

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buzzwords in the library field, giving rise to new organizations (Harvard University 2012), conferences (OCLC 2012), and publications (Journal of Library Innovation).

Sullivan (1992) drawing on Kanter (1986) was one of the first in the library field to point to the emerging entrepreneurial role of the library middle manager. Since then, library middle managers have come to be seen as “intrapreneurs” within and entrepreneurs outside their organizations expected to identify opportunities for innovation and leverage the resources needed to effect it (Lambert, Roberts, and Rowley 2011; Rowley 2013; Farrell 2011). Library middle managers increasingly are expected to secure buy-in from colleagues and others we might call “change partners,” strategize methods for bringing the desired change to fruition, and guide the activities necessary for ensuring success. Much in the literature has been written on change management – the process of guiding front line employees through changes implemented from above – from the middle manager’s perspective (Gorman and Williams 2013). Mosley (2004, 119-132) provides an important, almost paradigmatic picture of the library middle manager as the agent of change directed by upper administration. Little, however, has addressed the nuanced work of conceiving and implementing change from positions within the middle of library organizations.

This article thus seeks to provide library managers with a theoretical framework for thinking about how change is practically brought about by those in middle management positions. In doing this, two guiding theoretical principles will be put forward.

First, library middle managers must understand how their libraries and the larger institutions in which their libraries exist (universities, cities and towns, corporations) “think.” Drawing on the work of social anthropologist Mary Douglas (1983), it can be argued that effective change leaders should not view individuals as independent rational agents but should rather understand them as members of organizations who share the values of and think through the intellectual categories afforded by those organizations. By understanding individuals in collective terms, middle managers are able to gain a clearer understanding of what motivates people within organizations and how change can be framed and communicated to change partners, both of more and less authority, who must buy into and contribute to new organizational directions if change is to be successful.

Second, following economist John Kay (2010), it will be argued that effective change leaders rarely attempt to effect change through head-on, top-down, direct methods. This challenge is particularly important for middle managers to recognize since they generally lack the power and authority to bring about change by fiat. Rather, effective change leaders adopt indirect approaches to change, methods that adapt to the complexities of working with people of varying personalities in complex, changing situations and strategies that rely upon influence.

After considering these two principles, they are applied to several problem-based scenarios characteristic of many common change situations library middle managers face. Following each scenario, a possible solution or path towards change will be advanced in order to provide the reader with a model for putting into practice the theoretical ideas presented.

There are several reasons for adopting a methodology that combines both the presentation of theoretical frameworks and practical scenarios. The theoretical frameworks put forward can be seen as the core of what we might call the praxis of change making. As Jacobs (2008) defines it, “praxis” is “the interplay of theory and practice... [which] simultaneously tries to ground theoretical ideas into practicable activities and use experiential knowledge to rethink and re-envision theoretical concepts” (260). Darder, Baltodano, and Torres (as cited in

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Jacobs 2008, 260) explain the importance of developing praxis, noting that “cut off from practice, theory becomes abstraction or ‘simple verbalism.’ Separated from theory, practice becomes ungrounded activity...” Dreyfus (2004) characterizes praxis as a “phronisis,” a term from classical Greek philosophy that denotes the kind of practical wisdom skilled practitioners in all walks of life acquire through deep reflection on long experience.

The scenarios put forward, therefore, provide controlled opportunities for readers to think through the practical application of the theoretical ideas presented, thereby serving as aids to developing praxis. As Kepner and Tregoe (1960) note, the case method approach to business learning, which as Victor (1999) points out shares much in common with the use of scenarios, allows “the manager [to gain] vicarious experience in seeing how ideas have worked out and might work for someone else” (117). Scenarios present true-to-life situations that allow readers to project themselves into the action of the scenarios in order to think through various ways of approaching and solving the problem presented. But “because scenarios... attempt to stimulate thought about the process of analysis rather than a specific set of do’s and don’ts, multiple solutions are possible. Since many of these solutions are equally applicable, no ‘right answer’ exists” (Victor 1999, 100). The path towards effecting change put forward after each scenario is thus only one of many possible approaches to achieving change within the parameters outlined. The theoretically informed approaches to solving the problems presented in the scenarios challenge and even beg library middle managers to disagree with them. As such, readers should feel free to set the article aside and use the scenarios (or similar ones of their own devising) as jumping off points for independent, problem-based thinking or as topics for groups of librarians to consider and “war game.”

### **How Institutions Think**

Novice library middle managers very often make a common mistake when they attempt to introduce innovation within their unit of responsibility or the library as a whole. Seized with the brilliance of a new idea, many attempt to force change on their colleagues either through their actions or words. They believe that reason is on their side and that anyone willing to listen to reason—or at least their reasons—will be convinced that the changes they’ve suggested are necessary. Anyone not in favor of their suggestions is either irrational or irascible, depending on the middle manager’s perspective.

Gordon (2007) notes that librarians new to an organization run the risk of alienating the very people on whose cooperation they depend if change is to be successful. She argues that approaches to change “with less likelihood of alienating colleagues stand the best chance of success” and recommends that librarians “cultivate the ability to balance the need for change with respect for institutional memory and strengths,” because “understanding these perspectives can help you get yourself and your ideas taken seriously by long-term colleagues and administrators” (71-72).

Practical experience tells most of us that these are wise words: It’s best to try to understand and respect the way things have been done in an organization if one is to then become a successful innovator within it (Martin 2012). But what does it take to understand institutional memory and the way institutional memory determines how new ideas will be perceived and received? And how are individuals within organizations shaped by institutional memory and how does that affect their decision-making processes when change is suggested?

To answer these questions, we need a robust model of the relationship between institutions and the people who comprise them. The social anthropologist Mary Douglas puts forward such a model in her book *How Institutions Think* (1986).

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Douglas starts with the premise that only individuals within institutions think and make decisions. But she argues that this does not mean that these individuals are independent rational agents operating outside socio-cultural contexts. Institutions, no matter how large or small, constitute specific social spheres, the members of which establish collective beliefs and structures of thought that allow them to communicate with each other, make collective decisions, and coordinate collective actions. Douglas argues that “each kind of community is a thought world, expressed in its own thought style” that “penetrat[es] the minds of its members, defin[es] their experience, and set[s] the poles of their moral understanding” (128). Institutions provide a common framework for members to understand themselves and each other as engaged in important collective projects that depend on their ongoing solidarity and commitment to the group. For Douglas, institutions shape the categories of their member’s thought, not only informing their sense of who they are, but also circumscribing the scope of what counts as right or wrong, good or bad, categories that come to correspond to that which either preserves or threatens the existence of the institutions through which their lives find purpose and meaning.

Institutions shape their member’s sense of self and moral outlook in two primary ways. First, they are established on a founding analogy – a kind of metaphorical principle – that helps individual members make sense of their activities and efforts. For example, within academic libraries a common analogy is that of the library as the “heart” of the campus. This is clearly demonstrated in University of California Berkeley’s centennial celebration of its Doe Library appropriately titled “Heart of the Campus” (University of California Berkeley 2012), suggesting the library is to the campus as the heart is to the body. From that founding analogy a host of other relationships and purposes can be derived. The members of a different library founded on a different analogy – say an academic library that sees itself as the “crossroads” of the community (Smith College Library 2012), or a public library that sees itself as a “build[er]” of “community” (Seattle Public Library 2012)–will thereby have a different understanding of their mission and role as a library and as librarians.

Second, the members of an organization preserve institutional memories (as well as engage in collective amnesia when necessary) to reinforce the values of the organization. These memories help create an organizational narrative – the story the organization tells about itself and its role in the world. In Douglas’ (1986) words, “Public memory is the storage system for the social order” (70). Past events are interpreted through the system of meaning grounded in the institution’s founding analogy. Activities or events that do not fit with the group’s narrative sense of its past are often forgotten or reinterpreted to fit into the story told about the institution.

There is nothing mystical or magical about the way institutions give rise to thought worlds. Again, in Douglas’ view, it is not the institutions themselves that think. Rather, each individual member’s way of thinking is shaped in a similar manner by the institution–and for the most part these individuals operate unaware of these guiding beliefs.

Many libraries and communities do not have a stated vision or mission statement that explicitly articulates their founding analogy. The middle manager must therefore work to make these thought worlds clear to herself if she is to be an effective change agent. At times she must try to excavate the guiding metaphors that underlie the institution’s thought style and its members’ sense of their collective past in order to determine what will make sense to them for their future. Suggested ideas or courses of action that appeal to the group’s founding analogy or accepted history will be perceived to strengthen the group and thus be more favorably received. Those that violate the founding analogy or appeal to past experiences the group prefers to forget will be seen as threatening. Simply appealing to reason and expecting objectively good ideas to be adopted is in most cases not only ineffective; it is off-putting and counterproductive. The values that guide group decision-making are typically not logical values, but rather unique institutional values–the deep commitments to ways of thinking and doing that are shaped by the norms of the institutional culture.

### Direct vs. Indirect Approaches

For the library middle manager, change can best be thought of as a problem to be solved. Stated as a problem, change can be formulated abstractly as: How do I make X become Y? Or, more concretely: How do I get this particular group of people in these particular dynamic circumstances to bring into existence a new set of circumstances or way of doing things?

Senior managers can often take direct approaches to solving problems and creating change. They can exercise authority and direct others to implement their ideas. But this is not an option for those in the middle of an organization. Middle managers are almost to a person not in positions of complete autonomy or authority. As such their power is extremely limited. Whereas senior managers can and do at times implement change by fiat, middle managers depend upon suasion and their power to get others to lend their energies to projects or performance practices that originate in the minds and desires of themselves or those who direct them.

Kay (2010) provides middle managers with a useful framework for understanding the roles of direct and indirect, or what he calls “engineering” and “oblique” approaches to problem solving and change. In Kay’s view, the direct approach to problem solving views real world situations requiring change as situations that can be “engineered” to become better or different. Such an approach begins with the “engineer” defining the objectives or optimal outcomes he would like to bring about. The engineer then undertakes a “root analysis” (60) of those objectives to logically deduce the intermediate steps that must be taken to realize them. As Kay notes, the direct approach can be successful “if you are clear about your high-level goals and knowledgeable enough about the system their achievement depends on” (178). In other words, if a situation and its variable parts are relatively simple and can be understood much as one might understand the components and rules of a game, logical, a priori solutions to real world problems can be determined and implemented with success (63-65).

Some situations in life are like this. But most situations in need of change are much more complex. Direct approaches in such circumstances not only very often fail, but lead to even worse situations. As examples, Kay points to numerous failed attempts to engineer positive change, including the disastrous consequences of applying Corbusier’s architectural ideas to mass public housing problems (4-5), Robert Moses’ later work to “improve” New York’s transportation systems (53-54), and the most recent Iraq war (173-178). Those who take an engineering approach to problem solving are much like those who, in Douglas’ view, over estimate the power of rationality to operate within socio-culturally bounded institutions. Kay’s thought thus dovetails nicely with Douglas’: both are skeptical of the power of abstract logic to influence complex circumstances.

The world doesn’t often lend itself, according to Kay, to direct approaches to problem solving because our “goals are often vague” to begin with, “complexity extensive, problem descriptions incomplete, [and the] environment [in which we and those with whom we collaborate] uncertain” (178). Generally speaking it is not clear what moves one should make to solve problems and bring about change within or between complex institutions, as we understand them in Douglas’ terms. There are simply too many variables, too many moving parts, too many culturally and historically shaped attitudes.

Kay makes clear this complexity by drawing distinctions between “high level objectives” (the change outcomes we ultimately desire), “intermediate goals” (short term outcomes we need to achieve along the path towards realizing high level objectives), and “actions” (the concrete steps we take, relationships we develop, and choices we make as we progress in our course) (87). Engineering approaches based in overly analytical, a priori thinking discount the complex ways actions taken to achieve intermediate goals modify the situation in which subsequent actions must be determined, Kay believes. They also ignore the way the “parallel objectives, goals, and actions” of change

partners necessarily impact the practicable actions and goals afforded to the change leader (87). In other words, intermediate goals often must be modified due to the actions of others, which in turn may require the change leader to take new, unexpected courses of action, perhaps even modify higher level objectives in order to bring about a different, “best possible” change or solution.

Obliquity, Kay argues is best understood as a sophisticated form of “muddling through” problems towards the best solution that emerges as present actions determine future possibilities (59-67). “Muddling through” is not a nebulous process of intuitive, random actions. Following Lindblom (1959, 1979), Kay (2010) notes that it is in fact a “disciplined, ordered process” by which the problem solver, through acting and reacting to circumstances his actions have modified, evaluates successive actions by comparing the options delimited by his previous moves (62).

Classic works in the area of indirect strategy, books like Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals* (1971), Sun Tzu’s (5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E/1971) and Clausewitz’s (1832/2006) works on war, political and moral works like those of Machiavelli (1532/2005) and Baltasar Gracian (1647/2005), can be seen as studies that attempt to articulate some basic principles of the “science of muddling through.” As Kay (2010) notes, Machiavelli can be seen as “the epitome of the oblique decision maker” (136). In truth, the middle manager must be a little bit Machiavellian, since he is rarely in a position to engineer changes even if he is able to see clearly what needs to be done and who should do it.

But advocating that library middle managers adopt oblique approaches to effecting change is not a call for political or social manipulation. As with the use of any tool, strategic approaches to influencing and guiding the actions of others toward desired ends can be undertaken from ethical or unethical standpoints (Shell and Moussa 2007, 242-244). Like others who find direct approaches either impossible, impractical, or unfruitful—social activists who lack social or political power, military planners who cannot risk undertaking lines of direct attack, politicians or business people who rely on keeping their motives veiled—the middle manager must intelligently and ethically “muddle through.” The analyses that accompany the following scenarios aim to illustrate such an approach.

## Scenarios

### *Scenario*

#### **1 – Creating a makerspace in a public library**

Steven oversees the User Services department of a public library located in a historically economically depressed, former manufacturing town. A handful of public libraries of a similar size in other, more affluent areas of his state have recently experimented with creating makerspaces in their libraries, investing in new technologies including 3D printers and other expensive tools.

Articles in the press and on library-related blogs indicate that these makerspaces have become popular and heavily used resources and Steven feels that such a space might be both exciting to manage and useful to his community.

Both Steven and the Library Director, Margaret, are relatively new to the community and have only been employed at the library for the past three years. So far they have not introduced any major changes in library services, but both are intrigued by the possibility of creating a makerspace and see it as a possible avenue for economic development and job training for the community.



### *Analysis*

To begin, Steven should find it relatively easy to identify the founding analogy and consequent institutional tropes he and Margaret should tap into within the cultural context of their economically challenged community. If the former manufacturing town still views itself as independent, creative, and hard working, a makerspace can be explained to stakeholders as a way for the community to uphold and recommit to those root values. If the community wishes to move away from that image and recreate itself as a part of contemporary knowledge/information economy, Steven could frame the idea as a way for the town to move in a new direction. Whatever the narrative may be, innovation and the investments it requires can be made desirable by connecting it to community held traditions and shared perspectives. In a different institutional context—such as a suburban community whose values center around families and child rearing or a tech-centric bedroom community outside a major city—a different approach would be called for. Perhaps appealing to traditional family values or learning would work better in the former situation and the desire to be cutting edge, to be “ahead of the curve” in the latter.

Having established the values to which he and Margaret should appeal, Steven must next identify the potential stakeholders who might benefit from the creation of a makerspace or see such an innovation as beneficial and worthy of their support. Steven might find the “audience analysis and identification” section of the Public Library Association’s 2007 Toolkit, *Libraries Prosper with Passion, Purpose, and Persuasion*, a useful resource in this phase of his planning. To acquaint himself with prominent and influential community members, beyond obvious, well-known local political figures, Steven might turn to the library’s archives and local newspaper clippings to determine who in the community might become advocates or even donors for the creation of the makerspace.

If Steven could assume the existence of established relationships between upper management and prominent community members, extensive planning to identify potential supporters might not be necessary. But this is not the case for Steven. By definition, a middle manager must take an indirect approach if he is to effect change that requires cooperative relationships among many potential change partners where such relationships are absent. The middle manager must therefore exercise patience and accept that a long time horizon might be needed to see change accomplished. It also requires that one be willing to sacrifice the accolades one might receive from the larger professional library community for introducing a novel and possibly tenuous innovation for the long-term satisfaction of successfully implementing a new service that will last.

Keyes and Namei (2010) provide the field with a model for slowly developing change by applying the Japanese concept of *nemawashi* within the context of creating credit-bearing information literacy courses in academic libraries. As they note, “In its literal sense, *nemawashi* refers to digging around the roots of a tree and carefully binding them before beginning the process of moving the tree, in order to ensure successful transplantation” (25). Within Japanese business culture, the term has been metaphorically applied to describe the painstaking process of gaining the cooperation and “buy-in” of multiple stakeholders within an organization needed to implement an innovation successfully once all parties are on board (26). While *nemawashi* as a strategy for effecting change “may appear, at first, to be inefficient and overly cautious,” the slow process of consensus building allows all parties to identify with the common goal put forward, thus ensuring their commitment to the project’s success (27).

As the middle manager begins the slow process of *nemawashi*, he will find that each individual approached will bring his or her own agenda and interests to the table. Steven’s strategy must therefore be flexible. There is no a priori method to determine how conversations will unfold, how relationships will develop, or how one relationship will help or hinder the development of another. Steven must make his pitch in a politically savvy manner, tailoring his advocacy for the makerspace to the audience or individual he’s addressing. He may find it necessary to study persuasive influence techniques to build the buy-in and enthusiasm he seeks (Shell and Moussa 2007; Daly 2011).



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He may also need to adopt the kind of iterative, experimental approach to moving forward advocated for by Kay. As each relationship develops, new opportunities will be created or closed off, delimiting his scope of choice and action as he advances towards his goal.

Such slow change is made even more difficult from a middle management perspective in so far as some relationships can only be secured through the patient work of a willing senior manager or one trustful enough to empower a subordinate to develop strong ties with influential community members. Steven, in our scenario, is in a fortunate position. But senior library management can often be the most change-averse party in a library. Different organizations and institutions reward different kinds of leadership approaches. An institution may have survived because of an inherent conservatism in the culture. Rather than viewing individuals with vision and energy as leaders, those shaped by the values of conservative institutions may see such people as individuals who will put at risk the stability of the current institutional structure. And even if the library middle manager finds himself working with a supportive senior manager, as Steven does here, he might encounter conservative or reluctant community members whose help he and his manager will need if they are to realize their objectives.

As Bishop (2011) points out, it is easy for workers to blame rather than understand individuals whose work styles or personalities seem to inhibit the positive change or outcomes they seek (73-81). Such situations call for “workarounds” (Bishop 2011). Clearly, moving in a direction contrary to a supervisor’s or influential community member’s wishes would be a mistake. Steven might therefore seek to indirectly influence a senior manager or community leader to become more positively disposed towards change and perhaps even want to take on the role of change leader him or herself. To do this, he might try to tap into the power of what Patterson et al. (2008) call “social motivation” (137-165). Influencers, they note, “appreciate the...power that humans hold over one another.” Through their “ridicule and praise, acceptance and rejection, approval and disapproval,” people influence the ways others think about and either embrace or dismiss proposals for change (138).

The middle manager might try to identify “opinion leaders,” those who are “socially connected and respected” within an organization (Patterson et al., 148). Opinion leaders, or “sparkplugs” in Lubans’ (2009) terms, are people who, through their own social influence, can sway others in the organization in ways that the change leader may not be able to do. Steven might identify those who have the ear of the library director or community member and try to partner with that person on the project. Similarly, Steven might seek to stimulate grassroots interest in the project among important members of the potential change partner’s constituency—for example, the library’s board or a particular political district—to make it seem less daring and less risky and potentially more popular to those the reluctant party respects or needs than it otherwise might. For guidance on strategies and tactics for developing grassroots support for library issues in other kinds of situations, Steven might consult Comito, Geraci, and Zabriskie’s (2012) *Grassroots Library Advocacy*.

The middle manager can also look for examples of other organizations that have successfully implemented the desired innovation as a way of creating the kind of social pressure that might motivate a reluctant partner to embrace change. As Daly (2011) notes, fear can be an important source of motivation (227-230): the fear of being left behind, of being behind the curve, of not keeping up with one’s peers, of not seizing a profitable opportunity when one has the chance. If there is a peer institution or peer city that has embraced a particular innovation, the middle manager can find indirect ways of making senior management or community leaders aware of it, thereby exerting influence.

By working with opinion leaders, creating grassroots interest in a change, and tapping into fears, the middle manager can make the proposed change seem like something the senior manager or community leader might want to be associated with or even take credit for. Transferring ownership of change—ceding the role of change leader—

can be one of the most effective indirect strategies available to the middle manager, but a strategy that depends upon humility. When required, the middle manager must be willing to put the success of the idea above any desire he or she may have to take credit for it.

But such approaches require a delicate touch, Daly (2011) notes. The middle manager must make sure pressure to change is introduced in a measured, strategic way. Daly suggests a number of principles change leaders should follow lest the fear they introduce into the situation “boomerang” and turn the person being persuaded against an idea all together (228-230). Like any oblique move whose outcome is uncertain, social pressure can potentially backfire and rankle senior management or others whose help the middle manager seeks. It should only be used with caution and in an ethical manner.

### 2 – Improving customer service

#### *Scenario*

Cindy, the head of a busy circulation desk at a medium-sized academic library, has been receiving a number of complaints from patrons about her staff in recent weeks. The emails relate to issues surrounding the inability of students to register for classes due to fines owed to the library. The latest irate email was copied to her direct supervisor, the head of the library, who has directed her to get to the bottom of the problem and solve it.

Cindy has her staff keep an incident log to record any difficult or heated patron interactions. In the log they record the date and time of incidents, the issues or causes of the incidents, and how the incidents were resolved. She notices that there has been an uptick in incidents recently. The log indicates that other heated exchanges surrounding the same issue occurred around the same time, though they did not escalate to the same degree or prompt formal complaints.

After discussing the situations with staff, Cindy learns that patrons have become angry about staff’s limited ability to deal with fines blocking students from registering for classes. Patrons who have been waiting in long lines at the registrar’s office are being directed to lines at the library’s circulation desk for clarification about their fines, and are then directed by library staff to the bursar’s office where they have to wait on an additional line. Each department has its own separate computing system, none of which can be accessed or communicated with by the others. When patrons hear the news that they will have to wait on a third line from library clerks, heated confrontations result.

#### *Analysis*

When told by their supervisor to change a problematic situation, many middle managers might simply view the problem outlined above as a customer service issue and seek a quick and direct solution to the problem, one they can point to when asked by senior management to explain how they’ve addressed the issue. Such managers, looking for a “quick fix,” might arrange for staff to attend a customer service-training workshop. They might also peg individual staff members’ next annual evaluation to measurable gains (reductions in incidents logged) in the area of customer service.

However, it would be a mistake to address this problem directly as a simple performance issue. In this scenario, Cindy’s statistics point to systemic rather than individual performance problems. Moreover, there are a number of complex variables that indirectly affect Cindy’s staff as they attempt to work with patrons. Thus there is no clear path toward a solution involving multiple departments within the institution—bursar, registrar, and the library—each

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with its own culture, way of working, and way of thinking. Cindy must first understand how the different components of the institution have intersected to create the problem in order to determine what lies in her staff's power and what she can do to increase their ability to avoid heated situations going forward. While training can often prove effective in many circumstances (Sidorko and Woo 2008), problems that arise out of a complex nexus of causes cannot be solved directly through training because of the number of variables outside the control of the employees involved. Similarly, attempting to address these performance issues by goal setting amounts to coercion, a "carrot and stick" type approach that is "effective", as Kay (2010) points out, "only when we employ donkeys and we are sure exactly what we want the donkeys to do" (179).

As Patterson et al. make clear in their book *Influencer* (2008), complex change requires complex, indirect approaches. Like Kay, Patterson et al. don't view direct methods to create change as particularly effective. They argue that people can only engage change themselves or work towards creating or implementing new initiatives if they have two things: the ability and motivation to do so (75-79). We will use the ideas outlined in *Influencer* in combination with Kay's thought to examine how Cindy might increase her staff's ability and motivation to change the outcomes of patron interactions involving registration issues.

### *Ability*

Patterson et al. note that effective influencers "overinvest in strategies that help increase ability" (172) and suggest that change leaders approach the process of increasing the ability of change partners on a number of fronts, including their structural and personal abilities to change, which we will here focus on in turn.

It is well known that the choices people make and the behaviors they exhibit in various situations, including the workplace, are affected and often deliberately directed by the structure and architecture of their decision-making environments (Thaler and Sunstein 2003, 2008; Thaler, Sunstein and Balz 2013). In the language of Patterson et al., we can say that work environments can be designed to either enhance or inhibit the "structural ability" of employees to act in the ways we prefer them to act (220).

In the scenario presented, the structure of the work environment is the primary cause of the problem in need of change: college computing systems do not have the ability to communicate across offices. Students must wait in multiple lines to resolve their issues. Cindy might therefore begin by looking for ways to create structural changes in the work environment by identifying physical and procedural aspects of the workplace that impede staff from ideally functioning and from making the kinds of decisions during patron interactions that lead to positive outcomes. In this scenario, the middle manager will need to leverage new relationships across the college in order to find new processes that decrease student frustration and thereby indirectly avert conflicts in the library.

Again, Cindy has a choice to either address these other departments directly or indirectly. Adopting a direct approach would entail meeting with the managers overseeing these other departments, presenting data and angry emails to them, and proposing changes she might believe would solve the problem. The odds of such an approach working are quite slim. Most likely the managers of the other departments would see such suggestions as an attack or an accusation that their own workflows or processes, processes that have probably been in place for a long time, are the cause of what they would identify as her department's internal performance issues.

Like the larger institution itself, each department on campus has its own organizational culture and as with any indirect approach, one must begin by attempting to understand those cultures. A first step in this direction would be for Cindy to get to know or socially reconnect with the managers of those other departments in order to familiarize

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herself with their values and goals as well as the challenges they face. Once she has a sense of how they view their missions and relationships to the larger campus community, she might then introduce them to some of the issues she faces, including the problem at hand, which involve their departments. She may choose to frame the issue one way to the bursar's office manager and another way to the registrar's office manager based on the socio-cultural self-understanding each uniquely possesses.

By gradually introducing the problem with student registration, library fines, and payment, Cindy is able to connect the library's experiences working with frustrated students with the other units' most likely similar experiences in ways that make sense to them within the interpretative frameworks of their organizational cultures. From this position of mutual interest and trust, Cindy might then solicit proposals from the other unit heads rather than offer solutions herself, again engaging in an indirect approach to change. By giving change partners the power to suggest directions for change, Cindy avoids creating any impression of pushiness, accusation, or threat and transfers ownership over the kind and pace of structural change to her peers. Cindy's goal is to see that the structure of the work environment becomes such that her staff do not encounter situations that might escalate into critical problems. She need not be the direct cause of these changes. She may even wish to give credit for the changes to the other departments to build goodwill and social capital that can be drawn on in future situations.

However, given a sufficient level of trust and mutual understanding, Cindy might make some direct suggestions. Perhaps Cindy could propose that a phone for student use— a library hotline of sorts—be placed in or near the registrar's office so that students can call the library to determine the nature of their hold without losing their place in line. She could suggest that someone from the library with an iPad equipped to access library patron records be present or dispatched on request to students at the registrar's office at times of peak need. Perhaps an online payment system could be set up in the library to obviate the need for students to visit the bursar's office to pay library fines. Each of these changes enhances staff's ability to make better decisions during patron interactions involving registration issues.

As with any problem that requires an oblique solution involving multiple parties, each with their own objectives, any direction taken will have effects on the subsequent actions that seem relevant and possible. Cindy will need to constantly assess her interventions in order to determine the efficacy of her actions. Some of her steps may be false ones and not work out. She will then need to take a different approach, establish new intermediate goals, and clarify her ultimate objective to improve customer service at the circulation desk.

On a personal level, middle managers can help improve their employees' abilities by giving them opportunities to engage in the kind of "deliberate practice" (Patterson et al. 2008) that can increase learning and performance of essential workplace skills related to the change being sought (119). "Deliberate practice" is defined by Patterson et al. as a means by which the performers of certain tasks or behaviors crucial to achieving desired outcomes can practice that task in a highly concentrated, controlled, and reflective way, often facilitated by the help of a coach (118-119).

Cindy might identify the area of communication as the crucial skill—the "vital behavior" in Patterson et al.'s terms (23-44)—required to de-escalate potentially volatile situations at the circulation desk. Again, rather than sending employees to a workshop or training session on customer service related communication in which staff might be told about or even try new communication techniques, Cindy might develop opportunities for staff to deliberately practice such communication. She might allocate time once a month to have staff think through scenarios and engage in role-playing exercises that mirror the communicative situations they face at the circulation desk.

In order to effectively coach staff, both in such controlled settings and at circulation desk, Cindy may herself have to develop deeper knowledge of communication techniques, perhaps by studying the work of Radford (1999) and

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others both inside and outside the library field (Ross and Dewdney 1998; Fisher and Shapiro 2006; Stone, Patton, and Heen 2010) who have analyzed the principles of effective communication. Or she may wish to train a number of senior members of her unit in this area in order to have them serve as peer coaches, a more indirect and possibly even more effective approach (Manaka and Hughes 2007; Stoltz, Czarnecki, Wilson, and Martinez 2010). Once staff have begun developing a critical awareness of their communication practices, either she or those who have been trained as coaches can then observe staff/patron interactions. Much as elite athletes or musicians might watch or listen to recordings of their performances in order to identify areas for improvement, staff can “replay” their patron interactions with their coach and through reflective dialogue identify areas of excellence and areas for improvement in the skill.

### *Motivation*

Patterson et al. (2008) define personal motivation as the desire to want to do something and argue that change leaders can often acquire buy-in from change partners by influencing their will to change. Cindy might begin this process of indirect influence by examining the metaphors and narratives that guide her unit’s sense of mission to see if they are aligned with those of the larger mission of the college, including those of the bursar and registrar’s offices. If members of her unit have a limited conception of their role in the workings of the college, they may take a “not-my-job, not-my-worry” attitude when working with patrons seeking to resolve fines for the purpose of registering for classes. Have staff ever heard librarians or their peers’ language connecting their work to the diverse offices that tangentially relate to or depend upon the circulation department’s services? If not, staff are unlikely to know about the larger processes into which their work fits and may have little motivation to explain those processes and thereby possibly assuage angry patrons or avert their anger altogether. By adjusting her department’s mission statement – by setting up a new founding analogy for her unit – Cindy can slowly create a culture in which new values and attitudes among staff can flourish.

Next, she might examine how staff view patrons in human terms. Corporate or bureaucratic structures very often shape the way organizational members view those with whom they interact (100-104). We ourselves have probably been on the receiving end of interactions with corporate or bureaucratic functionaries whose treatment has left us feeling to a greater or lesser degree dehumanized. If staff simply view patrons as demanding students disgruntled by perfectly rational rules and procedures, if they have an antagonistic or even hostile attitude towards them and regard them as privileged or entitled, staff will lack empathy for their patrons and thereby the motivation to change the situation. Staff may then need to be opened up to or reminded of the larger lives their patrons live. Cindy will need to “humanize” patrons to appear to workers less as students disgruntled by rules and bureaucratic procedures—rules and procedures most likely outside the library’s control—and more as individuals whose success in college depends on staff’s help and kindness. She can do this by helping staff to become more aware of the “human consequences” of their actions, making clear how their work fosters or hinders student productivity and happiness and how that in turn affects the campus environment (100).

### **Conclusion**

As the above scenarios hopefully demonstrate, the middle manager who is under pressure to create change, find places to implement innovation, or grow new services must be prepared to seize on moments that present themselves unexpectedly. Moreover, his responses must be informed by the deep structures of the institutional cultures within which he is operating if his words and actions, his entreaties and efforts, are to find receptivity with

his institutionally acculturated audiences. In the course of leading change, the middle manager may at times run the risk of over-reaching, may misunderstand the analogies and narratives that ground and guide an institution, may muddle through towards a dead end. But mistakes are part of the process of developing praxis. By making mistakes, reflecting on them, and taking them to heart the middle manager acquires, in time, the kind of practical wisdom needed to make decisions in a more intuitive and artful manner in future circumstances (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986, 158-192).

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