Integrating learning and change management

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Client demand for an increasing variety and improved quality of information services in an environment of diminishing resources has led to pressure for libraries to be more productive, cost-effective and competitive.

It seems to be generally agreed that knowledge is the chief factor in achieving a competitive edge. If libraries are to compete with other information providers, who have the potential to appropriate our market share, then the rapid assimilation of skills and the smooth integration of change initiatives is imperative.

Training and development must increasingly support organisational as well as personal goals and be integrated with day-to-day work in a culture which promotes continuous learning.

The introduction of a change initiative such as total quality management provides an excellent opportunity for the integration of training with the task environment. The success of total quality management programs may depend on how effectively this can be achieved. As total quality management is applicable to both profit and non-profit organisations, and is premised on continuous improvement, the potential for competitive advantage and continuous learning is high.

Client service and teamwork are skills fundamental to total quality management and are perhaps the most readily integrated into workplaces where team-based structures and client focus are well established. Integrating the use of the quality tools and techniques used for analysis and evaluation is more challenging, as they are generally unfamiliar in library settings. For this reason, it is particularly important to design a program which: enables staff to rapidly apply learning to real tasks; demonstrates clearly how the tools and concepts will be used in day-to-day work; and links the training program to the library's overall goals and critical success areas.

Experience with the implementation of total quality management at the University of Wollongong supports this approach. When the library implemented its quality program in 1994, a consultant was employed to conduct training in the then unfamiliar tools and techniques of total quality management. Learning was assimilated for some staff through participation in quality improvement teams and client focus groups, but for the majority, it was business as usual, with information about Pareto charts, histograms and fishbone diagrams virtually forgotten. If the goals of internalisation of quality concepts and seamless integration with the task environment were to be achieved, then a different approach was needed.

Assessment of overall progress in the quality program in 1995 revealed a priority for the improvement of data collection and analysis and the development of organisation-wide performance measures. Since improvement in these areas necessitated a change at the task level, it was decided to design the training in such a way that staff and trainers would work together on task development while, at the same time, incorporating the required concepts and knowledge.

Programs, appropriately labelled workshops, were designed collaboratively by the staff development officer, the quality co-ordinator, the systems librarian and the acquisitions co-ordinator with broad direction from the deputy university librarian. Workshops were conducted team by team, with the design group taking turns to team teach.

Commitment from management, a key component of successful total quality management, (or any change strategy), was demonstrated through senior management's participation in each workshop. Staff prepared for the workshops by mapping team processes and identifying key team goals to be discussed and refined during the workshop.

During the workshop, once teams were satisfied with the accuracy of the process maps and goals, the concept of performance indicators was introduced, followed by joint development of indicators and measures for at least one key process. The relationship of team goals and measures to library-wide key performance indicators and critical success factors was established.

Following the workshops, teams completed the development of indicators for all core activities and goals. In this way, team strategic plans were developed and integrated to form the library's strategic plan for 1997–98.

Integration of the concepts and skills introduced at the workshops was supported further by using performance indicators when preparing routine reports or when suggesting improvements. In quality terms, therefore, staff were encouraged to make recommendations and decisions based on data, not intuition or gut-feeling alone.

Whatever the workshops may have lacked in polish, the goals of integration and assimilation were achieved, mainly because learning outcomes were linked with work to be performed and staff were fully-involved in the process. The participative, rather than pedagogical, approach generated a very positive sense of working and learning together.

Concepts and skills needed to accompany change efforts are most usefully acquired in the workplace where application is immediate and evident.

Management philosophies such as total quality management, may serve libraries well in the current environment of scarce resources, constant change and competition by emphasising the continuous improvement of client satisfaction, while reducing real costs. ∎