

# The skateboarding librarians

Between the 20th of September and the 12th of November last year, I had the enormous privilege (and an equally enormous amount of fun) undertaking a Churchill Fellowship tour to France, England, The Netherlands, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, and Germany. I had been awarded the Professor Jean Primrose Whyte Churchill Fellowship.

The fellowship enabled me to visit the leaders of many of the most outstanding National Libraries in the world, in order to investigate their management philosophies and strategies in creating significant cultural change. This exploration of successful change management by some of the library profession's most innovative and thought-provoking practitioners was an extraordinarily rewarding experience. Their zeal, intelligence, and dedication to their institutions, collections, users, and staff was inspirational.

I looked at cultural change in National Libraries and the resulting community benefit, through the prism of cultural change amongst and within the staff. In the opening presentation I made at every meeting, I included the statement, "Libraries are very good at technological change, indeed we are often leaders in this. Libraries are often very good at the organisational changes that follow up the technological changes and the changing needs of our users. With all these necessary changes, how do we move the majority of our staff from where we have been, to where we are now, to where we want to be?"

My complete report can be seen at <http://www.churchilltrust.com.au> where I explore some of the insights I gained from the more than 110 library directors and managers that I met with. For this article, however, I will concentrate on my experiences at the Royal Library of The Netherlands, which in many ways epitomises the thinking and practice across the other 16 library sites that I visited.

## The Royal Library of the Netherlands

The tone for my whole visit to the Royal Library of the Netherlands (or the KB as it is affectionately known throughout Europe, for the initials of its Dutch name) was set on the very first morning at my meeting with their long-serving, now retired, Director General Wim van Drimmelen. He said to me "Alan – when you go around my library you will think that many of the people you meet will look as though they have travelled to work on their skateboard. That's just how I like it!" He was right.

This is the fruit of over 20 years of his commitment to recruiting new, young people to his library. This is not to negate the skills and experience of the older, long serving staff, but to create an appropriate mix of skills and attributes.

His selection criteria is simple and direct. They must have brains, be experienced in I.T., have an affinity with the arts and humanities, and be motivated to use I.T. in library applications. He doesn't care what sort of degree they have but two criteria in addition to the above, are absolutely essential. "They must be the type of person who is eager to learn things" and "They are eager to develop themselves in library services on the basis of new I.T. developments".

Innovation is crucial. The KB has a Research and Development Division of 80 people, which equates to 25% of all staff. This is all funded through external grants, with staff regularly being seconded from other parts of the Library to these projects and then returning, energised and with new ideas and contacts.

A substantial volume on cultural change in libraries could consist of Win van Drimmelen quotes and here are just a few that I was privileged to hear in my meeting with him. They must be read with the same air of enthusiasm and optimism with which they were uttered.

"In an organisation of 350 staff I needed 20–30 change agents to really make a difference."

"Take your time and invest a lot in talking to people. The implementation will go more smoothly."

"Don't be afraid to have your heart sinking with new projects."

And my favourite, because I so want it to be true:

"If you have a good plan, you will always find funding."

These refreshing and positive attitudes were very evident amongst the other senior managers that I met with at the KB. They reinforced this fundamental approach to recruitment, staff development, and managing the library. The principles underlying these approaches include:

- Spend the most time and energy with the change agents. They will help the 80% of staff who will move onto the new way of doing things. Minimise time with the 10–20% who are not interested.
- Focus on a few things and do them very well.
- Shift to a more business mindset. After all, with our digital access we are now providing a 24/7 service.
- Appoint more talented young people to middle management. Recruit them from outside of libraries.
- Have the courage to say 'Goodbye' to each other if the circumstances require it.
- Amalgamate the workflows of digital and physical collections.
- Decide what classical tasks must be dropped to fund the digital.
- Become very good at changing, but not from Point A to Point B, because we don't know what Point B is yet.
- Move on from I.T. being a synonym for 'Too Late, Too Expensive'.



Alan Smith meets up with his award's namesake

- Line Managers are generally trained to control existing situations, not to control new situations. Therefore we need to have managers who like change – otherwise they create fear, not fun, around them.
- Try to create the 'hybrid library' where users get information quickly, correctly, and in a friendly way both on-site and online, but with carefully differentiated service offerings.

Irene Haslinger, the Policy Advisor in the Corporate Strategy Department, offered the following comments that expressed so succinctly the fundamentals about cultural change in libraries – and indeed any other large, complex, and long-established organisation.

- Change is ALWAYS about people.
- Change is cyclic not episodic.
- There are always 'Push' and 'Pull' factors in change, with the reactive 'Pull' factors having to be dragged to change.
- It is impossible to make all of one's people happy.
- Look at the people who resist – they resist for different reasons. Address the different parts of their minds. For example rational resisters may be persuaded by further rational arguments.

Her personal list of criteria for successful change were copybook in their simplicity and directness:

- Commitment from the top,
- Constant and consistent communication,
- Employee involvement at all levels,
- Shared vision of the future,
- Understanding of the need for change,
- Create a sense of urgency,
- Manage the political network.

Hans Jensen, the Director of e-Strategy has applied this approach to his task of building the digital library. Implementation of this has particularly been a case of the change people versus the don't-want-to-change people. The vectors need to be aligned in a more specific direction because in e-strategy there is no set destination. In the digital library users come more for the connections than they do for the collections.

His approach to speeding up the cultural change necessary is to analyze the existing staff, which has an approximate breakdown of:

- 1–3% really difficult people,
- 10% 'grudging',
- 80% in the middle,
- 8% innovators, change happy.

The 'grudging' people are seconded to other institutions where their skills and experience can still be of value. He then nurtures what he calls the 'Young Potentials', motivated and curious individuals with a high growth potential. These 8–9 people are grouped together for special training and coaching. They are the change agents of tomorrow.

By the end of my trip it was quite clear that diversity, agility, adaptability, dynamism, and an embracing of the positive

benefits of continuous change and a training environment that supports this, were the key indicators of a healthy, vibrant, and productive organizational culture within the highly successful libraries I visited.

There are many libraries within Australia that are working towards this but we still have some way to go. And we always will, for as Wim also said to me "Cultural change is a continuing story. Like Peyton Place, it goes on forever".

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## Read for Redfern: Waverley Library's summer reading program

"Why do they need to be bribed to read?" we asked ourselves. "Aren't they groaning with goodies post-Christmas?"

Waverley Library's summer reading program had functioned for seven years with sponsors providing inducements for our young users to keep reading over the long holiday period. In 2009 we decided that surely the reading was a reward in itself and that it could possibly be used to help others in the community.

With this end in view, we approached Waverley Council with the idea of sponsoring each registered child to the tune of \$1 for every book read, with the proceeds going to a charity.

Connect Redfern is an organisation which assists disadvantaged children, who are mainly Aboriginal or from non-English speaking backgrounds who live in the Redfern/Waterloo areas.

Our children embraced the program with gusto, their parents were most supportive and Read for Redfern raised \$1,424 for a delighted Jo Fletcher, facilitator of Connect Redfern, who will use the funds to purchase specifically indigenous reading material for her families.

We plan to adopt a different charity every year and give Waverley's children a goal which combines the joy of reading with thought for others.



*Mayor Sally Betts presents Tahlia with a certificate of thanks for her contribution*

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