



Creating a culture for innovation and change at the University of Technology, Sydney and the State Library of New South Wales

Alex Byrne
State Library of New South Wales
Sydney, Australia

A reflection on developing organisational cultures at two Australian libraries, the University of Technology, Sydney and the State Library of New South Wales, which welcome change and advance innovation. The paper draws on the author's experience in other Australian university libraries and in the leadership of IFLA.

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Abstract:

The University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) and the State Library of New South Wales (State Library) are both located in Sydney, Australia but poles apart in many respects. UTS, not 25 years old as a university, is a middle sized Australian university of some 30,000 students with a strong emphasis on professional studies and developing research strengths, especially in some areas of science and technology and in contemporary humanities. Its University Library operates from two locations and is highly digital, energetic and innovative. Focussed on information access and learning, it offers a modern discovery layer, 40,000 current serials (more than 95% digital), a collection of 600,000 books and growing digital collections and is heavily engaged with social media.

In contrast, the State Library traces its history back to 1826 and is highly collection oriented. Its collections of some 5.5 million items valued at AUD 2.2 billion includes the world's foremost collections on Australia and Oceania which it preserves, interprets and exhibits. At present, however, the Library limits its collection of born digital material to that captured through the National Library of Australia's PANDORA program. Implementation of apps and specialised image viewers are beginning to complement and extend digitisation of the heritage collections. Two of the State Library's other major responsibilities are to lead and support the statewide network of 374 public libraries and to promote learning across the community, roles which demand that it demonstrate and foster innovation in the public libraries and in the delivery of educational activities.

UTS University Library has earned a reputation across Australasia and beyond as an innovative library which welcomes change. That reputation was developed over a decade through strategies to overcome the constraints of limited budget, an initially bureaucratic internal culture and a bureaucratic and an often unsupportive university administration. Key strategies to support

innovation included building the necessary infrastructure, valuing diversity, permitting risk and possible failure, celebrating creativity and success, and blocking inhibitors. As a result, UTS Library has 'punched above its weight' for many years, returning great benefits through advanced services and superior access to scholarly information.

During my first year at the State Library I recognise many of the same constraints as those I encountered on arrival at UTS, and indeed in my previous post as the foundation university librarian at the then new Northern Territory (now Charles Darwin) University. They include limited and inflexible information technology, tired and inadequate building spaces, bureaucratic internal culture, ossified work practices and resistance to change in some areas, and a heavy burden of external compliance. Most serious of all was that many staff are unable to 'dare to dare', in other words they do not expect to be permitted to experiment and possibly fail. Over the four years of her tenure, my predecessor had done much to address these constraints and her success is evident in many areas but more is to be done in some.

The key question here is culture. If innovation is to be fostered and change embraced, it is essential to develop an ethos which values experiment and celebrates creativity. The workplace culture must become permissive, a culture in which 'all is permitted except that which is forbidden' and even the latter is open to debate. It needs to be a culture of respect, a culture which values diversity in all of its manifestations, including diversity of language, ethnicity, lifestyle, intellectual approach, age, gender, ... And it needs to be a culture which does not overvalue rank so that all may speak their minds and contribute their ideas without inhibition. For those of us who work in bureaucratic contexts it can be a challenge to develop such an ethos because the environment militates against it. That is where the leader becomes protector, nurturing the seed of innovation by sheltering it from the dry blast of bureaucracy, the chill of compliance.

My approach to the challenge of fostering innovation and change in the libraries I have directed has been informed by my experiences in IFLA and as an advocate for engaging with high issues of principle, especially the human right to know and the responsibility we have to recognise and support Indigenous peoples and their cultures. The IFLA I entered as a novice member two decades ago was a great international organisation but one bound by the constraints of its history and its self-imposed bureaucracy: it is significantly more nimble, responsive, inclusive and effective today. As the inaugural chair of FAIFE, I faced the challenge of introducing a new priority to IFLA, the recognition of the inalienable human right to know, a priority which for some lay outside the professional domain. And Indigenous issues, with which I engaged significantly from the early 1990s, have become for me a touchstone of our commitment to addressing wholeheartedly the information needs of all. Addressing these big issues convinced me that, to meet the needs of our clients and to fulfil our broader social role, our practice must fully embrace innovation and change.

As a young librarian, three years out of library school, I was fortunate to be entrusted with the responsibility to recommend how to integrate two library services when the Townsville College of Advanced Education (a higher level polytechnic) was amalgamated into the adjoining James Cook University by government decree. A little later, I was appointed Deputy Librarian at the brand new Australian Defence Force Academy which was a brave initiative to educate officers for the Australian

Army, Air Force and Navy together for the first time through a combined university and military program. These and other experiences prepared me for my first executive position, as the foundation University Librarian at the then new Northern Territory (now Charles Darwin) University in 1989.

This paper contrasts the measures I took over a decade to successfully create a culture of innovation and change at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) and those I am now taking in my first year at the State Library of New South Wales (State Library). It also reflects on my experiences at the Northern Territory University (NTU) and in the leadership of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA).

Background

The University of Technology, Sydney and the State Library of New South Wales are located at opposite ends of the central business district of Sydney, Australia but poles apart in many respects.

UTS, not 25 years old as a university, is a middle sized Australian university of with a strong emphasis on professional studies and some 30,000 students. Its research strengths are developing especially in some areas of science and technology and in contemporary humanities. The UTS University Library operates from two locations and is energetic and innovative with growing digital collections and services. Focussed on information access and learning, it offers a modern discovery layer, 40,000 current serials (more than 95% digital), growing collections of ebooks and other digital materials and some 600,000 printed books. It is heavily engaged with social media.

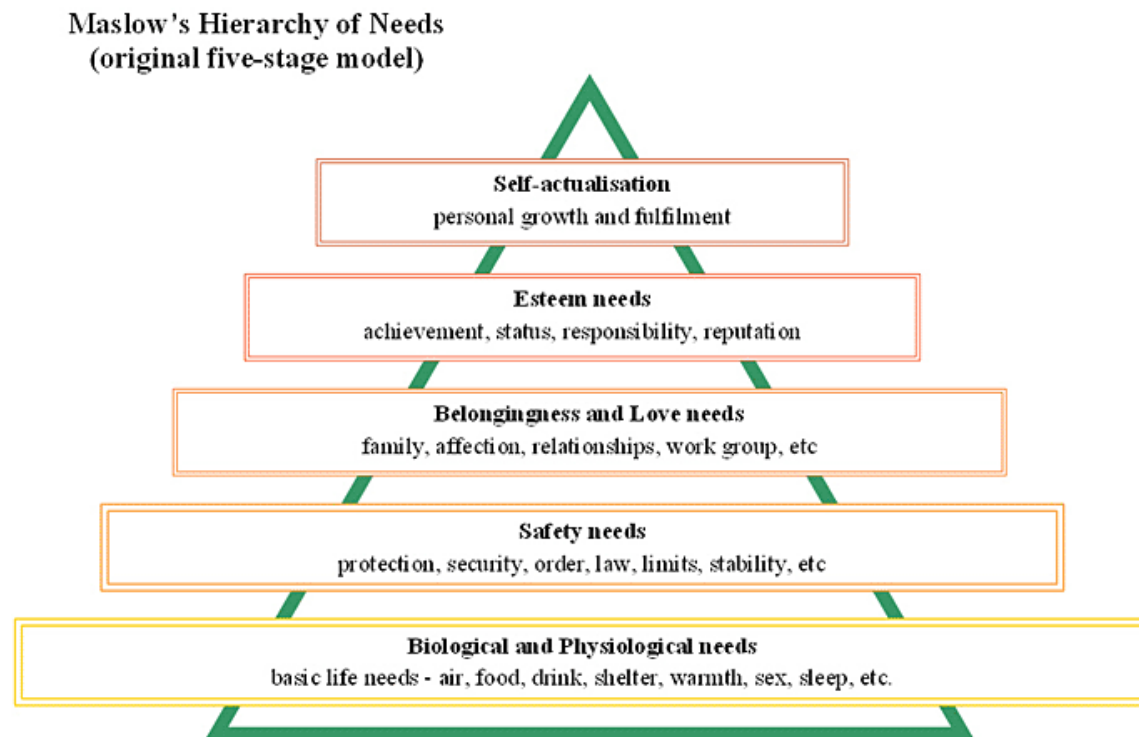
In contrast, the State Library traces its history back to 1826 and is highly collection oriented. Its collections of some 5.5 million items and 11 km of manuscripts are valued in total at AUD 2.2 billion. They include the world's foremost collections on Australia and Oceania. At present, however, the Library limits its collection of born digital material to that captured through the National Library of

Australia's PANDORA program¹. Implementation of apps and specialised image viewers are beginning to complement and extend a concerted program to digitise the Library's core heritage materials. The State Library is also responsible for leading and supporting the statewide network of 374 public libraries and for promoting learning across the community, roles which demand that it demonstrate and foster innovation in the public libraries and in the delivery of educational activities.

¹ The PANDORA Archive is a selective collection of web publications and websites relating to Australia and Australians. It includes materials that document the cultural, social, political life and activities of the Australian community and intellectual and expressive activities of Australians. (<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/overview.html>)

Theories of organisational change

There are many theories and a vast literature on organisational change from Abraham Maslow's pioneering work to recent textbooks such as Graetz (2011). Maslow's hierarchy of needs continues to offer managers a reminder of the fundamentals of human motivation:



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If we, as managers, can take basic standards of comfort as a given in a modern work environment, we do need to ensure that our teams and the individuals in them are properly protected through creating an environment which features well founded policies that ensure personal safety, stability, predictability and freedom from negative pressures such as bullying. Beyond safety, we need to foster a sense of belonging to the team and the organisation, identification with the organisation's goals and a strong sense of alignment between the individual's aims and those of the organisation. That alignment creates the foundation for shared aspirations and a shared sense of achievement at

all levels: team, branch, division and organisation. But esteem demands more than shared aspirations and achievement; it demands a high degree of autonomy, individual responsibility and mutual respect. These conditions in turn enable personal growth and fulfilment in the workplace.

The influential psychologist, Martin Seligman (Peterson & Seligman 2004) highlighted positive qualities which promote mental wellness and happiness:

Wisdom and knowledge – strengths that involve the acquisition and use of knowledge and include creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective and wisdom

Courage – strengths that allow one to accomplish goals in the face of opposition and include bravery, persistence, integrity and vitality

Humanity – strengths of tending and befriending others which include love, kindness and social intelligence

Justice – strengths that build healthy community and include active citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork, fairness and leadership

Temperance – strengths that protect against excess and include forgiveness and mercy, humility and modesty, prudence, self regulation and self control

Transcendence – strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning and which include appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humour and spirituality

Seligman and colleagues also identified patterns of negative behaviour resulting from adverse environments in his work on learned helplessness (Peterson, Maier & Seligman 1995). Their research indicated that lack of control led to social anxiety and learned helplessness, an inability to direct a situation. Further research showed that individuals react differently to situations that can cause learned helplessness with each person interpreting a situation or event according to her or his

own explanatory style and some individuals learning to be helpless through observation of others experiences.

Weiner's attribution theory (1986) offers insights into the ways in which individuals assign causality to situational or external factors or to their own qualities thus explaining workplace events in externalised organisational terms or as consequences of their own strengths or failings.

These analyses offer guidance and watchwords for the self reflective manager. We need to understand the differing motivations of our staff, the qualities which we wish them to display and which we should display, and the ways in which they may interpret events and situations.

Early experiences

As indicated above, my early experiences as a manager were formative. The opportunity to analyse and then recommend the best way to merge two quite different, medium sized, libraries taught me the importance of caring for people. It demonstrated to me that it is crucial to understand the needs of each individual in the work environment and to respect them. While it is not necessary to assign those needs strictly to Maslow's hierarchy, it is useful to understand the levels of need and to ensure that all are addressed, especially in times of change when staff can feel threatened and may interpret situations quite differently from what the managers intend to say or believe they have expressed.

During my time at James Cook University, I was also fortunate to work with a talented colleague, Helen Penridge, to introduce the online searching of research bibliographic databases. In those pre-Internet days, this opened up a world of valuable information to researchers at a university 1600 km from the nearest other university – or university library. This initiative offered a fine example of technological innovation which significantly changed behaviour. Not only did we introduce the

accessing of databases on servers located on the other side of the world in the United States and Europe to our researchers and to our colleagues in the university library but we provided services to researchers in surrounding small research units and began a service for the local business sector. Launched just after the move from card catalogues to computer produced microfiche catalogues – long before online catalogues – this innovation heralded the evolution of the library from collection centred to access centred. Seizing the moment, we also launched ourselves into creating databases relevant to local research concerns including the biology and management of the Great Barrier Reef. For many, these innovations challenged research habits and therefore had to be promoted and explained in ways which suited their fields. These experiences underlined the importance of not only managing but also explaining innovation.

Shifting to the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA), I continued to implement technological innovation in many areas, including the initiation of the Australian Literature database. I gained one especially important insight when we were introducing our first integrated library management system and the serials librarian decided to retire rather than work with the new serials module, not through pique but rather through a sense of her own boundaries. It is important to respect individual's boundaries while also necessary to challenge them at times.

Another most important lesson at ADFA was the power of organisational culture. As I mentioned above, the creation of the Academy was a brave initiative to educate officers for the Australian Army, Air Force and Navy together. The Academy thus brought together the organisational cultures and mores of the three armed services, the civilian defence bureaucracy and the university faculty and library staff. It provided fertile ground for misunderstanding and hostility. As Deputy Librarian, I was effectively the Chief Operating Officer and consequently had to work with representatives of each of these groups. By endeavouring to understand their culture and their priorities I managed to

advance the interests of the Library and its clients – the cadets and the faculty – within the new Academy, while ensuring that all parties felt that their issues and concerns were recognised.

Being appointed as the foundation University Librarian at the new Northern Territory University (NTU) was a tremendous professional opportunity to create a new university library from two small and very limited college libraries. One of the my most important responsibilities was to develop the *idea of a university library* in a remote institution in which few had any conception of the role and nature of a good university library, including few of the library staff. I thus had to cogently and persuasively express an inspiring vision. However, I also encountered an environment in which expectations were low and where there were ingrained habits and little appetite for change. So I had to develop a culture of change by valuing energy, enthusiasm and initiative and challenging habit. This was reinforced by celebrating success and learning from failure rather than punishing those responsible. Implementing these strategies demanded team efforts as we built our collections, IT systems, two new library buildings, our services and our relationships with academic staff and with students.

One example, a particularly important example, lay in our services to Indigenous students. NTU is located in Darwin in the north of Australia, an area with a large proportion of Aboriginal people. The University and its Library were under serving the Aboriginal community and providing inadequate support for Aboriginal students. By taking proactive approaches to engagement with Aboriginal students and staff – such as working with them in their environment rather than expecting them to come to the Library – and backing talented Library staff, we turned this around to become exemplary in our relationships with Aboriginal students, staff and the broader community. This experience emphasised to crucial of being open and responsive to cultural diversity in our increasingly diverse societies.

University of Technology, Sydney

UTS University Library has earned a reputation across Australasia and beyond as an innovative library which welcomes change. That reputation was developed over a decade through strategies to overcome the constraints of limited budget, an initially bureaucratic internal culture and a bureaucratic and often unsupportive university administration. Those characteristics of the University continue to persist but the University Library has been largely insulated from them and is seen as a high achieving and highly responsive element of the University.

Key strategies to support innovation included building the necessary infrastructure, valuing diversity, encouraging risk taking and possible failure, celebrating creativity and success, and blocking inhibitors. As a result, UTS Library has 'punched above its weight' for many years, returning great benefits to the Library's clients and to the University through advanced services and superior access to scholarly information. There are many examples which extend from restructuring areas to bring in new professionals to encouragement for staff to express themselves within the Library, across the University and in professional forums. Taking risks with new technology, being on the 'bleeding edge', was important to moving forward quickly and to demonstrating that innovation was valued and its successful implementation would be celebrated. But small ideas were also important such as taking up the suggestion of a younger member of staff that the University Library participate in International Edible Books Day and, subsequently, that we introduce a 'Fun Day' for students. Both showed that we could do our job and achieve much while being light hearted and fun loving, indications of a collaborative and friendly workplace as well as a library which joyfully welcomes its clients.

The success of these strategies has, of course, been demonstrated in the success of the Library and is reflected in its reputation. My success in building a culture of change and innovation was strikingly demonstrated in my decision to pass the organisation and operation of the Library's planning

process to a team of staff members without formal supervisory or management responsibility. Demonstrating trust in both the members of that team and the Library's staff in general, this approach loosened the Library's planning processes, generated a very strong plan and gained the ownership of the staff. It also discomfited some of our more rigid managers, which was not an unwelcome side effect.

IFLA

My approach to the challenge of fostering innovation and change in the libraries I have directed has also been informed by my experiences as the first chair of the FAIFE Committee and then as IFLA President-elect and President.

The IFLA I entered as a novice member two decades ago was a great international organisation but one bound by the constraints of its history and its self-imposed bureaucracy: it is significantly more nimble, responsive, inclusive and effective today. As the inaugural chair of FAIFE, I faced the challenge of introducing a new priority to IFLA, the recognition of the inalienable human right to know as a fundamental motivation for the work of the Federation and its members, library associations, libraries and similar organisations and those who work in them. For some, this priority lay well outside the professional domain with some suggesting that pursuing such goals should be the work of human rights organisations and not the peak international organisation for a profession which should limit itself to methods, standards, collaboration and the status of the profession. Clearly, I do not share that perspective. In my view, a profession must be founded on an ethical base and for a profession vitally concerned with access to information, that foundation must encompass unhindered access and its counterpart, freedom of expression.

Advocating for the human right to know, a fundamental principle, developed on my work to highlight the responsibility we have to recognise and support Indigenous peoples and their cultures.

From my work in the area over the last two decades, embracing Indigenous issues has become for me a touchstone of our commitment to addressing wholeheartedly the information needs of all. As IFLA President-elect and President, I worked with President Kay Raseroka and other colleagues to broaden that program of recognising the principles on which we base our profession and developing the Federation's priorities and programs accordingly. Implementing these brave agendas – FAIFE and IFLA's 'Three Pillars' – across the breadth and diversity of IFLA were challenging projects which called on all the skills I have developed in my professional career. Addressing these big issues convinced me that, to meet the needs of our clients and to fulfil our broader social role, our practice must fully embrace innovation and change.

State Library of New South Wales

During my first year at the State Library I recognised many of the same constraints as those I encountered on arrival at UTS, and indeed in my previous post at the Northern Territory University. They include limited and inflexible information technology, tired and inadequate building spaces, bureaucratic internal culture, ossified work practices and resistance to change in some areas and a heavy burden of external compliance. Most serious of all is that many staff have become unable to 'dare to dare', in other words they do not expect to be permitted to experiment and possibly fail. Over the four years of her tenure, my predecessor did much to address these constraints and her success is evident in many areas but more is to be done in some.

The key issue here is culture. If innovation is to be fostered and change embraced, it is essential to develop an ethos which values experiment and celebrates creativity. The workplace culture must become permissive, a culture in which 'all is permitted except that which is forbidden' and even the latter is open to debate. It needs to be a culture of respect, a culture which values diversity in all of its manifestations, including diversity of language, ethnicity, lifestyle, intellectual approach, age and gender. It needs to be a culture which does not overvalue rank so that all may speak their minds and

contribute their ideas without inhibition. For those of us who work in bureaucratic contexts it can be difficult to develop such an ethos because the environment militates against it. That is where the leader becomes protector, nurturing the seed of innovation by sheltering it from the dry blast of bureaucracy and the chill of compliance.

At the State Library, I am employing similar approaches to those I used in other institutions but feel a greater sense of urgency because we have so much unrealised potential and because we have, at this point in time, the welcome opportunity of an interested and supportive State Government, something which experience tells us that we should not take for granted.

Risk deserves particular mention. Many organisations are risk adverse in that they attempt to eliminate or at least minimise risk. This makes the organisations conservative and reactive, the major inhibitors of innovation and the willingness to embrace change. The better approach is to manage risk by identifying areas of risk, instigating strategies to mitigate risk and planning counter moves and recovery if adverse results eventuate. At the State Library, we take a risk management approach to intellectual property rights. While we do not wish to breach any rights, the copyright status of much of the content of our collections is unclear and sometimes impossible to determine. Rather than be risk adverse and consequently freeze access and use of those materials, we take all reasonable steps to identify rights and proceed to digitise, make available and permit use unless we identify rights which would impede those activities. We take this stance because we consider that there is a greater public interest in obtaining access to heritage materials than in inhibiting it. In other words, the risk of not providing access exceeds the risk posed by unclear rights.

Conclusion

My personal mantra for fostering a culture of change and innovation starts with trying to understand the needs of individuals and respecting their boundaries but not stopping at those boundaries. I try

to challenge habit while explaining innovation and change in terms which those affected can understand. Recognising the power of organisational culture, I endeavour to express an inspiring vision which values energy, enthusiasm and initiative and is open and responsive to cultural and other diversity. We need to trust, support experimentation, manage risk, celebrate success and learn from failure. Expressing a strong sense of urgency and driving to overcome constraints I would like to think I encourage us to be being light hearted and fun loving. And, underlying our practice, we much always hold tightly to fundamental principle and advocate for it.

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Brief biographical information:

Dr Alex Byrne a professional librarian, researcher and writer with deep interest in the roles of memory institutions, the complexity of issues relating to Indigenous peoples and transmission of knowledge, and emerging modes of scholarly discourse. He took up the position of State Librarian and Chief Executive of the State Library of New South Wales in September 2011 after serving as University Librarian at the Northern Territory (now Charles Darwin) University and the University of Technology, Sydney. Alex served for a decade in leadership positions with the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions including President from 2005 to 2007.