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Community Building Line Item by Line Item

By Catherine A. Lemmer

A1 write this in early December, life and work at the Legal Resources Centre of South Africa (LRC) over the past few weeks has been rich and varied. In addition to my regular job responsibilities, I helped finalize documents and register participants at the International Sexual Orientation Gender Identity Work Conference, which was co-sponsored by the LRC; searched for historical images and photographs of LRC activities during the anti-apartheid struggle; proofed and checked citations for an upcoming publication of the Bram Fischer Memorial Lectures; and cheered as the LRC cycling team crossed the finish line in the Momentum 94.7 Cycling Challenge. I have also moved furniture, pulled trash bins, and helped clean the library and its ancillary storage spaces. All things considered, these experiences have been both enjoyable and beneficial to me as a change management leader at the LRC library.

The LRC is a workplace where job descriptions and actual job responsibilities don’t always align perfectly. While this may be problematic for some, it is a great advantage for me as I am new to the LRC environment and need to come up to speed on not only my responsibilities but also on the work of the LRC overall.

The advantages of having invested time in these activities became increasingly clear to me as I prepared a three-year budget for the LRC libraries that will form the basis of a donor funding proposal.

Budget preparation requires a well-developed understanding of the core work of your organization. My extracurricular, “not in my job description” activities helped fill in the gaps in my understanding of the LRC’s work. My understanding of the dual Marty Linsky, adaptive leadership theorist, faculty member at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, and co-founder of Cambridge Leadership Associates, suggests that “the Nobel Prize for Leadership should go to the person or persons who have demonstrated unusual courage and skill in disappointing their own people at a rate they could absorb, in furtherance of the purpose of resolving a long-standing, seemingly intractable, problem.”

Budget development requires library directors to sift through and separate the essential from the expendable. The result is that in most cases law library budgets are disappointing to both users and library staff alike. Users express frustrations with reductions in hours, services, and resources while library staff often resists developing new skills to support a wider variety of organizational goals in the face of frozen salaries and benefit reductions. A successful director will have developed the relationships necessary to manage this disappointment.

A library budget is perhaps the first reflection of the changes the law library must undergo if it is to successfully adapt to the changes in legal education and the legal industry. Moving the library forward will require changes in people’s beliefs and work habits. In order to navigate from the known to the new—that is, to encourage change in people’s beliefs and work habits—I suggest the benefits of simple community building, both with your staff and user community. Such conversations and activities will engender a view of the library as a full partner, not just an add-on, in the organization. If my experience here at the LRC is any guide, it is not only advantageous but also enjoyable.

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