Current Dilemmas
How I Cope — The University Library

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Introduction

The title of this paper is "How I Cope". But I can only say how I'm coping when I've told you what I'm having to cope with.

An integral part of my presentation, then, relates to the issues, problems and challenges which I face and which I will be facing over the next few years.

Money — The Key

The fundamental issue, challenge or problem - depending upon how you perceive it - is money, or rather the lack of it. Money pays salaries, maintains buildings, buys books, periodicals, equipment and generally makes life bearable.

How do you cope if you don't have sufficient cash? I have a number of strategies, as follows:

a) Try and obtain more money from the parent institution.

Academic institutions are very policitcal organisations, if you know how to play the game, then it is surprising how many nest eggs there are. It is knowing what to say to the right people at the appropriate time. Cultivating the Director of Finance and the members of the Planning and Resources Committee is an essential part of that strategy. One is only likely to be successful if one demonstrates a need and a benefit (e.g. more money will be attracted, more students will chose UEA as opposed to University X or Polytechnic Y) and one accounts for - and is seen to be effective and efficient in managing - the additional money. I would emphasise the phrase "seen to be" in that sentence.

b) Look for alternative sources of funds.

Going entrepreneurial can be fun, but is is also damned hard work. Obtaining grants, sponsorship, benefactions involves time, effort and shrewdness. You have to decide where you are most likely to obtain money and go after it, writing submissions, wining and dining, making good contacts (as before) and being accountable.

There are problems here, namely:

– you spend too much time on trying to lever money and not enough on doing your real job (i.e. running the Library).

– you have to spend the money on things that are not top priority.

Does there come a point where one says enough is enough, as far as what I would term irrelevant income generation is concerned?

c) Make the most of what funding is available.

Chief librarians - especially in Universities - are often typecast as people who continually ask for more money. Money to counter journal inflation rates, money to buy more books with, money for equipment, computers, staff, etc. etc. Directors of Finance, Vice-Chancellors and Principals tend to regard the Library as a blackhole into which an infinite amount of money could be thrown without (in some people's eyes) an obvious return on the investment.

That view may be an heretical one, especially to those people who hold the traditional view of a library as a storehouse of knowledge which should exist for this reason alone. But it is a view with which people like me have to contend. And I contend by - making the most of - and being seen to make the most of - the resources allocated or earned - demonstrating the importance of the Library to the future academic and financial well being of the organisation.

I could deliver a paper on these three points. I shall restrict myself to three examples of what I mean here. Take expenditure, on binding, for example. We have cut substantially our binding programme at UEA for both books and periodicals. The shelves do not look as leather

bound as they once did, and we have to be more aware of security and conservation issues than before, but I believe we have saved money without substantially detracting from the service provided.

Secondly, we now use a formula to allocate acquisitions money between subject areas. The formula is based on faculty numbers, usage of material and cost. We aim to put money where it is most needed and - at least in terms of the University's academic strategy - where it is most likely to yield results.

Finally, we must ensure that we continue to remind our users that they can't survive without us. Once upon a time, University Librarians had it easy (as I see it) in terms of convincing the organisational hierarchy that the library was "a good thing". In these cost-conscious times, if the library is not so perceived, then it becomes an expensive luxury as far as the paymasters and mistresses are concerned.

Demonstrating effectiveness is not as easy as efficiency. I can say that I have the lowest staff unit costs of any of the new university libraries or that we are open for longer hours than most other libraries. So what? How effective is UEA Library at producing good quality graduates or at helping to attract research contracts? Only our users can say, and they may well take our role (considerable though I believe it to be) for granted. So I take every opportunity to demonstrate our effectiveness through listening to what senior academics in particular say, want and are pleased with about the Library. I make sure that I take every opportunity to see that the Library is involved in new developments (a) to be seen to be participating and (b) to integrate library provision with academic strategy. An obvious example is the teaching of personal transferable skills. This is new (or at least reintroduced) concept in universities. The Library is a marvellous practical laboratory for teaching and learning information handling, group work, working to deadlines, and a whole host of required skills - but too often we are seen as just a storehouse. We have to get across the footlights.

Other Important Issues and Strategies

That ends the first part of my presentation. I've concentrated on money, resource management, efficiency and effectiveness because I believe that these issues are crucial to coping. But in talking

about them, I've hinted at other strategies - also very important and useful for answering the question "How do I Cope"?

Let us look at them.

a) Have a planning framework

This is often difficult in universities but from my experience it is far easier to cope if you know where you're going, what you have to achieve, how you'll get there and what might stop you. Universities are being asked to provide medium-term strategic plans and this is an opportunity to focus on issues relating to Library planning and institutional planning as it relates to the Library.

Whether or not the parent institution creates a planning framework within which you can work, you have to provide your own. This could be a formal strategic plan - complete with SWOT analysis - or a series of major policy statements - or simply a set of basic principles on how to progress. Whatever form it takes it should be generally known about, as far as possible and agreed within the Library.

Having got some kind of framework, the process of decision-making is so much easier - especially in difficult circumstances. Take the question of resource allocation, for instance. We use a formula, discussed, debated and agreed (if not liked) round the university. That makes the increasingly tricky business of spreading jam very thinly much more tolerable than it would be otherwise.

I am not for one moment suggesting that decision-making should be reduced to a mechanistic level, or that decisions should be taken in an inflexible way (our formula results are adapted in the light of experience and judgement) but a basis for planning and decision-making makes life easier.

b) Having taken a decision stick to it

The process of taking decisions can be made easier. Sticking to them is always likely to be much more difficult. But I believe it is an essential strategy in coping. Stop/go policies, or chopping and changing approaches are disruptive, unsettling and inefficient. Yes, there may be times when there has to be a change in policy/practice and when radical alterations in direction are the only alternative. But those changes must be thought through and assessed and then implemented until further notice. To take my example of formula funding. That

approach is now accepted as the one to be followed at UEA for the foreseeable future. The details will change but the principle remains the same - despite occasional/regular opposition/criticism in some quarters.

c) Have a bottom line

I referred to this principle of coping earlier when I referred to income generation and its relationship with the library's basic aims and objectives. But it is a principle which pervades the whole of work and life. In my plan, programme, negotiation or situation, there has to be a bottom line. Again, I don't believe in rigid bottom lines, but I do believe in some basic point, level, principle or attitude which should remain the same. An obvious institutional example for me would again be formula funding: the introduction of a formula was non-negotiable once past the basic discussion stage; the nature of the formula and the way in which it was applied were and still are. A similar situation will have to obtain at UEA Library over the next few years in respect to space; we don't have enough of it, there will have to be a relegation and withdrawal policy - general agreement - full stop. Let's talk about what kind of policy, what sort of implementation and soon.

One should also have personal bottom lines - standards, morals, amounts of time available for particular projects, a determination to have a life outside work. Those are unique to the individual and I would not for one moment wish to impose my bottom lines on you or anyone else, except that, as a Senior Manager, I believe one has to set group standards as well as one's own. That is done by example rather than instruction.

d) Challenge traditional/cherished assumptions

Change can be exhilarating; it can also be threatening. It is very natural to stick with what one knows, with what feels comfortable. But it is also wrong. An organisation which does not recognise the need to change, which does not see which way the wind is blowing, will wither. One should maintain one's standards and values but be prepared to change one's assumptions.

For example, we must maintain a commitment to providing the best possible service to our users; but I would question whether we are doing that if we continue to do over the next

twenty years what we have been doing over the last two decades. For instance, I cannot believe in a policy of taking an ever-decreasing number of journals as the purchasing power of my acquisitions budget continues to deteriorate. Better to have a bottom line which, when reached, leads to a novel kind of library provision which could be just as cost-effective - it not more so - than an increasingly inadequate holdings policy. University libraries have been slow to embrace access rather than holdings policies, but we are rapidly catching up - I doubt if we have much alternative. The CHEST/ISI initiative, whereby all the citation indices and current contents facilities will be available over JANET (Janet Academic NETwork), when implemented, may prove to have been the turning point.

At UEA, we are already considering a substantial move from holdings to access in respect of scientific journals. In other words, we will cancel our subscriptions, concentrate local resources on providing current contents services and transfer the relevant part of our acquisitions budget to the inter-library loan and similar budgets (as for example reference materials).

I am not saying this will be easy, but I believe it will be necessary if we are not to become academically as well as financially bankrupt. It will not be easy because it challenges a basic and long-held assumption about academic library provision. At the same time, I do not believe in throwing babies out with the bath water. If you're good at doing something (e.g. book providing) then don't throw that strength away if you can avoid it. Rather reorientate the strength so that it is still perceived as necessary.

e) Seize opportunities

Again, I have hinted at this strategy in my earlier discussions of money matters. A successful strategy for coping with challenges and problems must include seizing opportunities. This strategy can take a great many forms. It could be catching the Director of Finance while he or she is in a good mood; it might be suggesting a Library input into a development when you know that the organisation is looking for help; and it must be spotting where money is and trying to get it.

I shall restrict myself to one example. Universities have had to wrestle with the intricacies and implications of the new

copyright legislation and of a licensing scheme agreed between the CVCP and the CLA. UEA Library faced a threat and had an opportunity here. The threat was that we would be landed with the task of monitoring copyright without warning or additional resources. The opportunity came as a result of the University knowing it had to do something about copyright, but not being sure what its obligations were.

Following a proactive line, the Library offered to provide a complete copyright advice and clearance service and to oversee the implementation of the licensing scheme provided that (a) a Pro-Vice-Chancellor was in overall charge (with the Librarian reporting to that person as necessary) and that (b) we were given half-a-post to carry out the work. We got what we wanted; control, a clear statement of responsibility and additional resources. The University got a smooth transfer of the new legislation and the licensing scheme and service which will be of broader benefit and may extend outside the University. It helped to have someone capable of doing a good job, too.

f) Develop staff

This last comment leads me on to my next point: the importance of staff development. Whatever I say will sound corny, but I genuinely believe that staff are an organisation's most important resource. This harks back to my earlier point about making the most of resources. But I would also say this: "No man or woman is an island". One obvious way of coping is to share the problem or challenge. Again, I could give a whole paper on the subject of staff training and development. But I won't. I'll merely restate the obvious, that personnel are the most important resource which an organisation possesses and expertise and commitment can make a great difference to how one copes.

g) Take time over PR

"Winning friends and influencing people" is an important element in coping. I've already referred to marketing and making contacts so I won't give any further examples, except to stress the continuing need for PR to demonstrate:

- plans

- aims

- commitment

- efficiency

- effectiveness in particular.

h) Work from experience, not textbooks

I was struck by a comment in John Harvey-Jones' book Making it Happen: Reflections on Leadership. He says how tired he is of the "with-one-bound-Jack-was-free" 'type of management book where all you have to do is follow the recommended course and all will be well. As the former chief of ICI points out, real life isn't like that: answers evolve or are not there at all.

Textbooks may help but can't answer challenges and problems. You make your own solutions - solutions based on trial and error - on learning from experience. As Samuel Beckett says, "Try, fail, fail again better".

i) Don't worry - be positive

And finally, I cope by not worrying about the problems and accepting challenges. That makes life and librarianship much easier to handle.

If you think you are beaten,

You are;

If you think you dare not,

You don't,

If you'd like to win, but think you can't,

It's almost a cinch,

You won't.

If you think you'll lose,

You're lost;

For out in the world

We find

Success begins with a person's will,

It's all in the state of mind.

Life's battles don't always go

To the stronger or faster one:

But soon or late

The one who wins

Is the who who thinks

"I can". ❏