Building a Culture of Strategic Risk-taking in a Science Library: Creating Psychological Safety and Embracing Failure

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Abstract

Academic librarians and library managers are always exploring new ways to empower their team to provide the best services to the entire research community. This requires organizations to take innovative approaches to new ideas as well as existing services and initiatives. With innovation, a certain amount of strategic risk has to be involved, but how much is too much? More importantly, how do you create a culture where people feel free to take risks and, sometimes, fail? These columns explore those questions as a case study of the Dirac Science Library at Florida State University.

Introduction

Florida State University (FSU) is an R1 research institution with almost 42,000 students and approximately 1,800 faculty as of 2016. In 2015, FSU received over $200 million dollars from outside sources including almost $170 million from federal agencies. FSU is located in Tallahassee, Florida, which is also the state capitol. The Dirac Science Library was opened in 1988 and serves students and researchers in all of the sciences on the Tallahassee FSU campus and many off campus programs. The building has been renovated based on qualitative and quantitative data to meet the needs of the STEM students and faculty. STEM Libraries at FSU consist of the Dirac Science Library, FAMU/FSU College of Engineering Library, as well as subject librarians and staff that provide research and learning support to the STEM community.

Starting From Scratch

Last August, the Director for STEM Libraries returned from six months parental leave. At the same time, two new science librarians were hired to replace vacant positions. One was a new librarian and the other was a data librarian who moved over from the main library. While the Director was on leave, the Dirac Science Library was managed by an interim director from the main library and two other librarians who volunteered to provide guidance and leadership while there were no science librarians in our organization at the time.

The only thing more fresh than our library space were the faces of our librarians and staff. The majority of the staff and librarians had been employed for one year or less. Additionally, our entire staff consisted of early career professionals except for our director. Despite all of the new faces, the majority of the staff in our library were in traditional roles such as circulation and reference. These

circumstances provided their challenges but also their own opportunities to define and push the

boundaries of what a science library and librarians are to the STEM research community.

The combination of a new space, fresh faces, and relatively new leadership provided an

opportunity to evaluate what was important to us and our community as well as start from scratch and

begin building. When our associate director and director first broached this topic, they agreed on a

logical starting point: building a culture of innovation with an emphasis on strategic risk taking. Like

most academic libraries, the majority of our work gets done in teams. The combination of diverse skills

and abilities can yield greater results than individuals working on their own, from the authors'

experience. In order for people to be comfortable with risk taking, they needed to be comfortable with

failure in a group setting.

Group Norms and Psychological Safety

In 2016, investigative reporter, Charles Duhigg wrote an article in *The New York Times* that

highlighted a 2012 initiative conducted by Google code-named Project Aristotle. Duhigg explored this

project while trying to figure out why some teams work well together and produce great results and

others fall short. Project Aristotle's goal was to study hundreds of teams at Google to determine why

some teams excelled and others failed (Duhigg, 2016). While the Aristotle team was struggling to find

meaningful patterns, they kept stumbling upon research by sociologists as well as psychologists that

focused on the concept of "group norms." These norms are the traditions, unwritten rules, and

behavioral standards that govern how teams function (Duhigg, 2016). Duhigg goes on to mention

specific traits such as conversational turn-taking or average social sensitivity as contributing to overall

psychological safety.

Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson (1999) defines psychological safety as "a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up…It describes a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves" (p. 354). Developing this sense of psychological safety in our team is something that we have focused on since last August and feel that there has been increased productivity and a greater sense of ownership in the work of our librarians and staff. This development process started by deliberately encouraging our team to try new ideas even if they were not sure if they would be successful. It also included our managers providing specific examples of failed projects and lessons learned from their previous work.

In Duhigg's article, he contrasts two hypothetical teams. Team A is filled with high achievers and individual stars. In this team, people wait their turn to talk and only speak to matters in which they have expertise. Side comments are met with reminders about the meetings' rules and meetings start and end exactly on time. Team B is quite different. Their talent level varies from novice to expert, people talk over one another, and they rarely stick to their agenda. Once off script, Team B wanders together thinking and solving problems in their own way. Duhigg suggests that, while Team A may be filled with smart people, it is likely that they will continue to act like individuals during group projects, which will have a negative impact on their work. On the contrary, Team B may speak over one another, go on tangents and socialize rather than focus on the agenda. The team may seem inefficient to a casual observer but they are all sensitive to one another's moods and share personal stories and emotions. While Team B may not have as many individual high achievers as Team A, their sum will be greater than its parts. Last August, the rigidity of our meetings was closer to that of a Team A but have steadily shifted towards a Team B mentality. Our meetings and work sprints rarely start on time as

everyone is scrambling from their previous meetings or lunch with colleagues. We get our work done but rarely stick with the agenda during meetings.

Both our director and associate director have a combined experience of almost 20 years with FSU Libraries and have served in several different capacities. Both were staff members before earning their MLIS and both were librarians who served as functional specialists. One was an assessment librarian and one a data librarian but both made their fair share of mishaps because they are both in new positions without predecessors. This is important because a young team that lacks experience is prone to mistake making and we have to make sure that failure does not deter their enthusiasm and creativity. Some of us have had managers that discouraged us from "leaving too many things on the side of the road" and urge us to continue with projects and initiatives even when they do not seem to be on a path for success. Overall, this can be demoralizing and can decrease psychological safety. It also greatly reduces the chance that we will be willing to try something new.

Conclusion

When laying out the work of a new project with team members, we preface each deliverable with an assessment of risk and time allocation. We also make a point to tell everyone how we have experienced failures and challenges with similar endeavors. This serves two purposes. It exposes our managers' vulnerabilities, letting everyone know that it is okay to fall on your face at times as long as you doing the proper research before a project to ensure that the rewards outweigh the risk. The second purpose is to make the group aware of potential roadblocks ahead so the team is prepared for them. Failure is part of the innovation process but we want to avoid making the same mistakes more than once.

References

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