Building a Culture of Strategic Risk-taking in a Science Library: Turning Failure into Learning Opportunities

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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.

Keywords: *Risk taking, culture building, innovation, team building, psychological safety*

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 consists 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.

Strategic Failure

Our last column discussed psychological safety nets that allow for strategic risk-taking in team environments. This involves being okay with failure from time to time. There are numerous examples of notable success stories that involved failures throughout their path. A recent *Forbes* article titled "Five Ways to Make Peace with Failure," provides stories about people like Abraham Lincoln, Jerry Seinfeld, and Oprah Winfrey who have had their fair share of setbacks before putting it all together (Tardanico, 2012). These stories emphasize a focus on perseverance, working past emotional letdowns, and keeping an eye on the horizon in their efforts to overcome failure. Being honest about previous setbacks helps our organizations and our profession move forward.

All of this being said, failure is not always embraced or accepted if it is not strategic. Strategic failure involves understanding the risks and rewards before embarking on something new. If the risks

are low and the potential rewards high, then a failed attempt can be seen as strategic. Examples of

failures that lack strategy usually include either making the same mistake multiple times or a lack of

effort and commitment from one or more interested players. Some failures are associated with

working in one direction for too long without considering other options. Understanding the difference

between types of failure allow our team to approach problems in a way that minimizes setbacks and

emphasizes growth and innovation. It is also important to acknowledge that some failures are not due

to anything we have done and are entirely caused by outside factors, such as the structure of the

organization that we are working in. Librarians in leadership roles need to be cognizant of this and do

everything they can to create a structure that does not hinder production or creativity.

Group Norms and Psychological Safety

Examples of failure learning opportunities:

In the course of about a year, we have piloted several new programs and initiatives to help

better serve STEM researchers on our campus. These attempts involve doing research, forming

partnerships, and trying new things. For example, a professor approached one of our staff wanting to

partner for an event between their department and the Dirac Library. They worked together to plan a

one-night outreach event promoting a specific research center on campus. However, there were

logistical hangups and bureaucratic hurdles to overcome. The two groups had trouble agreeing on

financial responsibilities and individual roles, which resulted in the event not ever happening. In this

example, expectations were not agreed upon early enough in the project. This, combined with

communication breakdowns, was the reason the project failed. Since then, we have partnered with

stakeholders across campus to host events in and out of our library that have been quite successful.

FSU has an Office of Proposal Development (OPD) that works with researchers to find funding opportunities as well as assist with the development of the grant application. This office approached our librarians with a new idea. We have been partnering with OPD for years to help the FSU community comply with public access mandates, which includes making the publications and research data of federally funded research publicly available for reuse and analysis. OPD knew that we provide remote support via office hours at select off-campus research centers and institutes and were interested in partnering to provide what they described as research support throughout the entire grant lifecycle: finding funding opportunities, performing literature reviews, drafting data management plans, as well as archiving data and publications. We agreed that this was a fantastic idea and a potentially useful resource for researchers who were off campus. After a two-month pilot, there were almost no visitors, even though we were providing weekly support at multiple locations. This likely had to do with prematurely launching the pilot program without sufficient marketing and advertising. Location selection is another potential issue. Both parties agreed that the best way to move forward was to take a temporary pause in office hours support in order to increase our advertisement, consider other locations, decrease the number of hours per week before trying again whenever a new semester starts. Our shift in approach will increase the chance that researchers will utilize this encompassing and convenient approach to assisting them.

In 2011 FSU Libraries conducted a comprehensive ethnographic study of library use at our university. This resulted in both Dirac and the main library being remodeled and alteration of services to better fit the needs that were discovered in the study. The study also confirmed that students were doing their most intensive studying and homework assignments in the later evening and night. However, by the time students are settling down to work most of our librarians have gone home for the

evening. This could be a problem for students who needs last minute help on a paper or other assignment. In response, one of our staff who works in the evening created a pop-up reference desk that is set up and staffed a few hours per week. The idea was to give students the immediate help they need and allow staff to make referrals to appropriate subject librarians or functional specialists if the student require more in-depth assistance. Like our previous example, this was met with minimal success. While this pop-up desk received questions, they were not any different than those asked at our main service desk. After reviewing patron transaction data and consulting with the staff member who piloted the program, we decided to end this service. One thing about being okay with failure is that we have to also accept when our best ideas are not met with that same enthusiasm by our audience. In those cases, we either have to reformat the idea or sometimes pull it all together. This is not always easy but allows for us to focus on other projects.

Conclusion

We listed three specific projects that did not work out in this column but only resulted in minimal loss. The loss was staff time and energy that was invested in the work. However, each project resulted in a learning opportunity and provided us with enough information to make more informed decisions moving forward. These failures were strategic. When we informed the staff member who started the program that we would be ending the pop-up reference desk he simply smiled and said he agreed and is looking forward to focusing his energies elsewhere. This is because, going into the pilot, he knew there was a high chance that this would not work out. He also knew his managers would be okay with failure as long as we learned something from it. It is important to emphasize that we all work hard as a team to create this culture and it does not happen overnight. We would like to provide all readers with a specific challenge: every time you are asked to try something new, please ask yourself

how bad the consequences would actually be if you tried and failed. Finally, we would like to challenge

library leaders to ask themselves what they can do to cultivate innovation through the creation of an

environment that welcomes failure so that members of their team feel empowered to take risks.

References

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