

# A Culture of NO

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## Abstract

The author muses on the seeming resistance to change in libraries, wonders about its origin, and ponders how to overcome this tendency.

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## Introduction

There seems to be a culture in libraries that makes it difficult to say yes to new, innovative ideas. While some libraries do seem to be able to break through this cycle, there are many who simply can't. How many times have we said to each other in the hallways, "Maybe we can do that after X retires, but until then it's just not going to happen." Whether it's the people, the policies, or the politics, something about libraries seems inherently resistant to change.

It's something I've noticed over the years, but was reinforced yet again by our attempt to submit a grant proposal for a Truth and Reconciliation area in our library. Immediately, barriers were thrown up – from "You better make sure someone else on campus isn't submitting an application to the same grant" to "We can't use that area of the library for that reason" to "What? Move the books from their LC-classed homes to a different section? Never!" (this, despite the fact that we already have several other LC-classed special sections, such as reference, oversize, display, etc).

What is it about libraries – and those who work in them – that makes it so difficult for us to say YES? Anything new, innovative, or out of the ordinary is seen as a threat. This manifests itself in many ways – either outright refusal (we can't do that, it's a policy/risk and safety/health violation) to more subtle responses (we'll say yes in a meeting, but no one will ever mention the idea again). I am certain this is not unique to our library, but it's a habit we need to get out of in order to remain nimble and viable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. To be fair, this may be a trend seen beyond the library into the rest of the university, aided no doubt by the bureaucracy and governance systems therein, but it seems especially endemic in libraries.

I would ask why this is, but I'm fairly certain it has to do with the type of people who are attracted to library work. Staff at all levels seem to have a predisposition for order, organization, rules,

and policies– and for most of the time, with good reason. Of COURSE we should be orderly and careful with the acquisition, caretaking, housing, and preservation of our library materials. But sometimes, it's ok to do things differently, too.

When I think about the ideas I've thrown out for ways to improve our users' experience or increase circulation of materials, most of them have to do with moving things out of our hallowed Library of Congress Classification System. Like the aforementioned TRC area, I've also heard NO to the film prof who wanted to highlight the many wonderful DVDs in our collection and move them to a more visible place in the library; or putting some of our more contemporary and popular fiction material – usually aimed at English students – into a Popular Fiction collection located near the front of the library. Certainly, I understand that the work involved – changing the location codes in the LMS, and perhaps adding a sticker to the spine of these works to highlight a different shelving area – is not insignificant... but shouldn't we welcome work that is actually going to make the library look more friendly, helpful, welcoming, or relevant? Shouldn't we look forward to the possibility that we could increase our circulation, in a time of dwindling statistics? Apparently not. This goes for other ideas, too, such as running a contest to promote a database, using vendor-supplied promotional material, or changing the configuration/staffing models for the reference desk. All things new are met with a great deal of resistance.

This knee-jerk reaction to say no to patrons and each other stands in stark contrast to our supposed mission to serve them. That's not to say that no librarians ever go above and beyond in finding an answer or resource, because clearly many do. But the rules and regulations are so often strictly adhered to, that sometimes common sense doesn't kick in to allow the flexibility to bend those rules when they make sense. It's also in direct opposition to most libraries/librarians' instinct to bend

over backwards to accommodate other campus or community partners. For some reason, the NO instinct doesn't kick in at all when these types of collaborations are broached, and sometimes the library gets the short end of the partnership. Think, for example, of the academic librarian asked to deliver a specific type of information literacy instruction, when every instinct in them knows that another type would better serve those students. Sometimes our aim to serve is to our detriment. In this way, the internal culture of no is quite markedly different than our external tendency to say yes at all costs. As a service unit, libraries seem hard-pressed to say no to anyone outside the library even if it makes no sense at all to say yes (for example, it's outside of our mission, priorities, or funding capabilities) but when it comes to the small details of day-to-day operations, yes is hard to come by.

I wondered how those working in other libraries felt; is this isolated to our library, or more widespread? Turning to the literature, I found evidence for both. Many articles have been written on how to change a library's 'culture of no' in order to foster innovation and growth in a time of change. In 1995, Goleski described a program developed for library employees to learn to say 'yes' more often to both co-workers and patrons; Block & McNeil echoed many of these sentiments in their 2015 article describing a rebranding project at Jackson Public Library. Schlosser (2011) described Ohio State University Libraries' process of strategic reorganization and noted that many of the authors writing on library culture indicate a change is needed. She cites Casey & Stevens (2007) who opine that the culture I found at our own library is all too common, citing a 'culture of no' and a 'culture of perfect' as they describe familiar scenarios of ideas shot down and inspiration trampled by bureaucracy. They also cite staff who as time wears on, get stuck in their ways and put up barriers of every sort to change. Especially in academic libraries, people tend to spend large swaths of their career in one place, which could be one of the causes of this inertia. Dohe & Pappas (2017) talk about the power of saying 'yes' in

improve and how that practice can help in libraries as well, noting that is often not the usual instinct-but it can be developed. In her book *Yes! On Demand*, Middleton (2017) emphasizes the customer service attitude needed in libraries to succeed, and outlines how to turn attitudes from No to Yes and empower library employees in the process. So I was not alone in my assumption that this tendency to say no is prevalent in many libraries, not just mine. However, it is clearly evident that many libraries are working hard to change this, though it seems mostly in public libraries. This may be due to the funding whims public libraries face, thus making them feel more vulnerable; academic libraries may feel more secure in their longstanding association with the academy, rightly or wrongly, though they too are often fighting to prove their worth.

At the same time, much has been written about libraries' *need* to say no – Epstein (2017) & Cruz (2013) both wrote about this need in the *Public Libraries Online* just a few years apart, indicating this propensity is also not going away. There is also much in the academic library literature about our tendency to say yes to external stakeholders; much has been written about space encroachment (for one, see Nitecki, 2011); unreasonable information literacy requests (for example, Owusu-Ansah, 2004); and faculty influence over collection development (Shen, 2012). So we aren't always saying no, which can sometimes be to our detriment. It's evident that libraries need to strike a balance between *no* and *yes*; that balance may come with setting some priorities in addition to empowering employees to make the right decision at the right time.

I get it. Change is hard. I find it hard too. And we love order in libraries. I do, too. Really. But I suppose my customer service orientation – *patron* service orientation, in the library – runs deep from my days as a client representative in an advertising agency. I'm always looking for creative ways to promote our products and services – after all, why else are we here? But it's exhausting to come up

against one brick wall after another; soon, those who generate new ideas will just give up trying. Lack of innovation and customer engagement isn't the only risk to this culture of no – staff motivation (and ultimately, retention) is also at stake.

There ARE brief glimmers of hope here and there. While they don't happen without a lot of grumbling in the background, some ideas do get to see the light of day. Like keeping the library open after hours for a games night (no, people didn't get out of control or have sex in the far corners). Or hosting a 'stress-free zone' during finals in the evenings (despite so many initial objections and fears, this put us on the map media-wise and has become our most popular event with both staff and students). And the more innovative initiatives see the light of day AND are successful, the easier it is to accept change into the organizational culture. So it's important to keep the big picture in view, and keep asking, pushing, and innovating... despite the occasional NO.

One tactic I've realized that works – and certainly something I've seen our Dean use – is to 'socialize' an idea. Bring it up in multiple contexts; at first, as an idea you're floating; next, as something a bit more concrete; and eventually, as a full-fledged proposal which has fully explored the options, the potential problems and solutions, and the benefits to the library. Mention the idea casually to colleagues; as ideas in a meeting; and eventually, as an official agenda item. People usually bristle at the first mention, but eventually, once they've had time to think about it and incorporate it into their body of knowledge, they will come to accept it (and likely offer helpful suggestions to improve it). By the time it becomes a reality, it's no longer new and frightening, but something that has been in the ethos for some time.

Oh, and guess what? That TRC area we proposed... the grant wasn't accepted, but the community response was so positive that money was found to fund it anyway! So sometimes it pays to

push up against the NO. The more we push those boundaries, loosen our policies, and show that all hell won't break loose each time we make a change or bend the rules, the more people will get used to it. So go for the ask; socialize the idea; and eventually, you just might get a YES.

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