Human Error

When good intentions meet bad planning, library users pay the price

by Jeanette Woodward

The library director beamed appreciatively toward the bright new circulation desk in the equally new entry of the just-opened library. Looking somewhat farther down, she took note of the colorful young adult area and the inviting periodical lounge. After living with harvest gold and avocado green for so many years, the new library was truly a delight for her sore eyes.

In the back of her mind, however, she felt a niggling doubt as a librarian with cordless phone inhand practically vaulted over furniture to answer a reference question. When had they decided to locate the reference area in such an inconvenient spot? Hadn't they spent hours discussing traffic patterns and sightlines? And why was it so difficult to see what was going on in the beautiful new children's department?

There's hardly a librarian who hasn't felt at least uncomfortable doubts at the completion of a building project. You can consult dozens of instructive references, spend long hours poring over floor plans, and involve many different groups in meetings about every aspect of the new library. Still, errors that seem so obvious after opening day somehow creep into the plans. What goes wrong?

In talking with many librarians, I've concluded that despite the talents and good intentions of the individuals involved in a building project, it's the group process that is usually at fault. Groups have the advantage of bringing a wider variety of insights to bear on problems, but there is a downside: Some poor decisions seem to be the direct outcome of group dynamics rather than the bad judgment of any one person. Group decisions that initially seem brilliant get made on the spur of the moment. Looking back on them, however, it's hard to imagine why no one noticed their obvious flaws.

Since groups are involved with the design of nearly all libraries and library additions, we had better confront the problem openly and honestly before it gets out of hand. If everyone involved in a project would agree to abide by the following rules and if the group accepts responsibility for seeing that the rules are followed, a lot of future hand-wringing will be avoided.

Rule 1. At the very beginning of the project, make a pact with everyone involved—from board members to circulation clerks to community members—that there must be agreement in advance on the way group decisions will be made. Once that agreement is reached, participants will need to be reminded again and again and again.

Rule 2. Ban spur-of-the-moment decisions. This is a really hard rule to follow and will require a lot of practice.

Meetings are tiring. We begin with a clear focus and plenty of energy. Eventually, however, we get tired and cranky, anxious to go home or get back to that pile of work. When meeting participants arrive at this frazzled state while considering a knotty problem whose solution is eluding them, someone will inevitably make a loud, firm, and authoritative statement intended to put an end to fruitless discussion. Tired minds will grasp at it, wondering why they hadn't thought of it earlier. This decision is often the one that is recorded, and all too often it is the one that should never have been made.

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Sometimes a committee works for months, exploring various alternatives before recommending a plan. At the last minute, their proposal comes before a board of trustees, a city manager, or a university dean. If those individuals are not parties to the agreement about how decisions are to be made (see Rule 1), they may become the victims of instant inspiration. They notice something that seems excessively expensive or inconveniently located. "We'll fix it," they think, and quicker than the blink of an eye they do.

Unfortunately, most decisions have a downside. If the circulation desk has a good clear view of the entrance, it won't have an equally clear view of the stacks. Most quick fixes inevitably mean that something else gets broken. The result will be arrangements and locations that are not quite right. Sometimes, it is the less important problem that is solved while the essential function is sacrificed.

Administrators and oversight groups have a responsibility to critique and approve the their subordinates' work. However, they are no less vulnerable to the perils of instant fixes. Since they cannot spend large amounts of time review-

ing all the pros and cons involved in a decision, they should express their concerns and refer them back to the planning group. Individuals who are especially concerned may even wish to sit in on these deliberations. A building project is far too complex for any individual to understand at first glance, and no matter how perceptive one is, it takes time to see how one change affects other elements of the plan.

Rule 3. Observe the 80/20 rule by keeping your typical patron in mind as you plan. In every library, there are patterns that might be described as "business as usual." Staffing decisions are made based on past experience; collection development is guided by past circulation. Librarians try to call to mind their average patrons when making decisions about future needs. However, there are exceptions. The library may be adequately staffed most of the time but not at noon on Saturday when the reduced staff must juggle lunch hours. Patrons normally request similar types of books but every once in a while staff get that obscure question about cryogenic research in the Gobi Desert.

The same is true when planning a library. As you pore over floor plans, you should have a good idea what your staff and users will be doing about 80% of the time. You can predict roughly the number of patrons using the internet computers and anticipate the most heavily used traffic areas. However, there are always situations that don't fit the norm. The best decisions are the ones that serve the library and its customers 80% of the time. However, special needs—those that come up infrequently—must be addressed as well. As a librarian, you don't redirect your collection to meet the needs of that cryogenics researcher; you fill the request through interlibrary loan. In other words, you try to find a way to meet the unusual need without penalizing the many who have very different reading habits. The same is true in building planning.

Ask staffers to describe their typical day. How many are stationed in public services? How many customers are using the library at 10 a.m.? At 7 p.m.? Get out those statistics you've been collecting for so long. Which collections are the most heavily used and the most likely to expand? Which tables, lounge furniture, and study carrels are occupied first? Why are these popular? If an area doesn't get heavy use in your present library, it's unlikely to attract patrons if you recreate it in the new facility. Once you have this clear picture of a business-as-usual day, you can design a library that can be staffed most efficiently and that meets most customer needs.

Now, what about the other 20%? The library has a responsibility to serve its customers with different needs. For example, a customer in a wheelchair has a right to a safe and successful library experience. A service desk may need to be left unattended for brief periods. Although the library must be prepared for such situations, a decision that interferes with its ability to function effectively 80% of the time or serve 80% of its patrons is a poor decision. Each time a decision is made about the location of an office or the positioning of an elevator, the 80% rule should be observed. Undoubtedly, there are situations in which you have no alternative, but every option must be explored before conceding defeat.

Rule 4. Consider fully the implications of decisions before sharing them with your architect. Let's imagine, for example, that the architect has presented some preliminary plans for your building committee's review. Your group will have many questions since laypersons need help interpreting blueprints and the language of building professionals. The architect should understand, however, that you must have an opportunity to digest the information and meet separately to analyze the plan. Group members will need time to recall their own experiences and imagine different scenarios that would impact the arrangement of furnishings, the location of meeting rooms, or the positioning of the front door.

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The architect must not be placed in the position of deciding which off-the-cuff comments to incorporate. Instead, only ideas that have been carefully examined should reach the architect's ears. Let's return to the librarian we met at the beginning of this article. Who, she wondered, could have designed such an impractical reference area? In truth, maybe no one carefully considered all the advantages and disadvantages of such a layout. Instead, a number of people expressed their views, and the architect took note of the ones most forcefully expressed, or the ones most easily understood by someone unfamiliar with libraries.

It isn't often that we have a chance to design a new library or new addition, and we want to take full advantage of the opportunity. Libraries are extraordinarily fortunate in that they can call on the services of so many intelligent and dedicated people when that exciting moment arrives. Creating a solid structure for decision-making now can help to bring all these diverse contributions together to produce a more successful library that will delight customers and planners alike. ▮