
Team Librarianship: The Only Way to Develop a Librarian

Team
Librarianship

John Smith and Susan Houghton
Cumbrian County Library, Carlisle, UK

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I read Shelagh Fisher's article in your last issue (*LR*, Vol. 39 No. 6, pp. 22-30) with considerable interest and incredulity. I am interested in where on earth are the systems she has been examining. Certainly team systems in business and industry need to be examined alongside the library's potential.

She has certainly not studied the Cumbria team system or its detailed review by Loughborough University[1] with published results, nor has she read my article in *Modern Management* on the Cumbria system. I presume she has not seen a review of the system by the Audit Commission[2] or examined an analysis by the Office of Arts and Libraries[3] of our approach, which was significantly complimentary and was investigated from the bottom up and not from the top down; nor would I imagine has she examined our bottom-up business approach planning which demonstrates the motivation that a team system can imbue into a service.

There seems to be little awareness, in detail, of the potential of the team system approach for the individual librarian, which I would suggest has been demonstrated in Cumbria. The advantage of branch librarianship which she described demonstrates the coprologic approach to professionalism which will not endear us to any worthwhile future or attract any future professionals of note. Business and education are moving from mechanistic to organic systems and we must attempt to develop organic management systems, and that means a team approach.

Shelagh Fisher has six conclusions:

“Team librarianship does not increase and enhance the individual's personal and professional development. . .”

In my experience team librarianship does enhance considerably the individual's personal and professional development by giving them opportunities for leading and sharing far wider than those they will encounter in a branch library.

Team librarians are often confused and bewildered by their lack of building-based identity and loss of supervisory roles. The “go hang yourself” approach of some public library team systems is more likely to encourage mass professional suicide.

First of all team librarians must be building-based as well as community-based; if they are not co-ordinated and well-led then that will happen whether the system is organic (team)[4] or mechanistic (hierarchical). But to put librarians into supervisory roles, which could easily be done by lower paid clericals, is a silly approach. I know of at least one branch-based system where the professionals spend 95 per cent of their time doing clerical work. I want my librarians to

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do 100 per cent professional work and I would suggest the only way we could do this is to have a team system.

Shelagh Fisher's second criticism is that:

"Team librarianship does not improve communication between individuals and the organisation. It creates a different, more divisive set of hierarchies, particularly between professional and non-professional staff and between team librarians and specialists."

Team librarianship enhances communication because it allows a team to organise itself and allows the leadership within the team to be well organised and to enhance communication and I would recommend that the best communication is listening and that too much communication is the way in which communication is frustrated. Any team working closely together must enhance communication, especially if it is well led, a crucial element. Nor is it divisive if the system is well structured and all jobs are co-ordinated and complementary.

Her third criticism is that:

"Team librarianship does not improve the individual's career prospects. Team librarians may be unemployable in public library systems which are not team-based, due to the lack of specialisation or supervisory management experience."

My team librarians supervise and work with clerical staff who run libraries and they do not lack supervisory experience at a professional level. Because of the team approach, a management development programme is enabled in both on-the-job and theoretical training to such a degree that they enhance their professional prospects.

Team librarians straight from college not only have a close caring, professional community from which to work and learn but in my system they are given considerable responsibility way over and beyond that of a branch librarian. They have to get involved with the public and relate the resources which they organise and control to the needs of the community which they discover and serve, as well as supervising professionally the work of branches. They work in specialisms on specialist projects which may vary from children's librarian to local history and within each team there are specialists; in fact every member of the team has a specialism. There are children's specialists, local history specialists, housebound and hospital specialists. There is even one member of a team who specialises in providing a service, among other specialisms, to a prison.

Specialism, as a corporate unit, is the heart of team librarianship because the co-ordinated skills of the whole are greater than the individuals working independently and they stretch those individuals and develop them, so much so that many of my staff when leaving find that, although they move to better paid jobs, there are few which give them such extensive responsibility and experience. They recognise that they have something special. They can also exercise leadership within the team, in their specialisms.

Shelagh Fisher's next criticism is that:

“Team librarianship does not provide a more supportive interpersonal work environment than branch library organisation. Librarians in teams are potential enclaves of ‘navel-gazers’, trying to work out what the team is supposed to be doing rather than getting on with the job.”

Who has been leading teams that Ms Fisher has been studying? It sounds like chaos, not like self-organising teams. She should examine the competent business plans produced by my teams across this county, with ambitious targets which are met. The team organisation provides, and in Cumbria certainly does provide, a very supportive interpersonal environment for both the clerical and professional staff. I have seen, over many years, how those teams have provided a supportive pastoral care system for each other, of which I am intensely proud. There is real caring for each other which is incredibly supportive at times of difficulty and surely is part of any effective team? If we care for each other we will care for those who we serve.

Ms Fisher’s next criticism is that:

“Team librarianship does not maximise the use of relevant professional skills. The team librarian’s potential flair is stifled by the ‘group ethic’ whose function is simply to maintain the group. Decisions made by groups may, at best, be safe, but, at worst, unimaginative.”

I notice that throughout her paper, Ms Fisher does not describe the need for leadership, which is the crucial element[5]; certainly, in my teams, leadership passes around the team, although there is an Assistant County Librarian organising as team leader.

I could show her four teams in Cumbria serving the general public, where the flair for service is seen to be stimulated by the group ethic. Decisions made are certainly imaginative and some of the solutions proposed have produced work of the highest order.

Finally, Ms Fisher suggests that:

“Team librarianship does not provide greater opportunities for participation, increased job satisfaction and motivation. . .”

I certainly find the contrary: a well led team, well organised with development of members certainly allows for greater opportunities for self-development and participation within the system. The decisions are owned by the team and matters are delegated to them.

May I suggest a challenge to Ms Fisher? I have obviously extolled the virtues of a team system of which I am extremely proud. We have an organic management system which encourages and develops motivation and participation even in the most difficult times, as now. The quality of librarianship is high and the organisation, although never perfect, has achieved great things in small ways for small communities. Shelagh Fisher is welcome to come and study our system and talk to all levels of staff to see what they think about it. Where it fails my staff are certainly not slow at coming forward to me. There is no muddling along and there is a built-in dynamism which comes from the teams themselves.

There has been a great deal of work[6] about the way teams work and I do acknowledge that a badly organised, badly led, badly motivated team is far worse than a rigid hierarchy; but a well-led, well-motivated, well-organised team outperforms any other form of organisation. There is an inevitable problem with local government that there is a degree of autocracy within the political decision-making processes and this is all too easily translated into a hierarchical system of management which is less effective than a team system.

I have external documentary proof that supports my arguments. I think that team librarianship is the only way forward for the future because it enables greater use to be made of the potential inherent in the individuals who work together in the teams to develop their potential maturity and their professionalism. Maslow[7] has shown very clearly that a mature individual is both individual and corporate and a developing person makes a singular contribution to both the organisation and to their own personal development, *an ongoing spiral of supportive personal and professional achievement.*

A team can achieve great things; it can also fail badly. But I would suggest that Ms Fisher's approach is not at all rounded and that she has not properly studied an effective team system.

The challenge that I offer her is to come and have a look at Cumbria where I think the team system has worked and worked extremely well and where we have adopted my 12 principles of management[8] which I think work. These are:

- (1) Organic organisation — flexible, loose, light properties — maximum delegation.
- (2) Simple structures which can be easily understood. Complex problems reduced to manageable priorities (chunking).
- (3) Lean staff — whose priorities are supporting the field teams.
- (4) Hands-on management who are value driven.
- (5) Socratic leadership — transforming leadership.
- (6) Team organisation — an action-based entrepreneurial approach.
- (7) People-centred organisation, both for the people we serve and the staff who serve.
- (8) Close to the customer — relate to the needs of the user. Concerned both for the user and service and the effectiveness of organisation.
- (9) Quality orientated — doing what we know how to do — doing it well. Learning based.
- (10) Action orientated, needs based research, action research — people talk to each other.
- (11) Evolutionary approach.
- (12) People should enjoy work — it should be fulfilling and enjoyable.

These are expanded in my article in *Modern Management*.

I would enjoy debating with Ms Fisher but I think her total misrepresentation of a method of working, which is increasingly being developed in industry and

the services, is one that does this profession no good. Branch librarianship, as she describes it, is not for graduate professionals with ability and social visions. But we need librarians who have social and individual visions for our society and who can interpret society's aims into particular actions.

Addendum

(By Sue Houghton who has recently moved from a traditional system to Cumbria's team approach.)

Having recently experienced both team librarianship and the more traditional structure of a public library authority, I find that I must disagree with Ms Fisher in both her arguments and her conclusions. After 12 months in Cumbria I have not ceased to be impressed by the calibre, expertise and commitment of the professional staff. Not only do these staff man busy enquiry desks but they also have responsibility for branch libraries and staff to supervise, as well as a subject specialism within the team. Their enquiry desk duty covers reference, local history and children's enquiries, alongside the everyday queries, and I have not seen a lack of any specialism yet. On the contrary, all these tasks are performed well with the librarians at least keeping their options open for a future career move rather than specialising too soon. Some senior managers would benefit from the wide range of duties experienced by Cumbrian librarians.

The key to this high performance level is, I feel, motivation factors that the team system offers. It is the very freedom, responsibility and involvement in decision making that stimulates the staff and enables the many services offered by Cumbria to be delivered by well-trained, highly motivated staff. The atmosphere is created by the structure and the management of that structure is also important. Any group of people working together benefit from "openness" and "honesty" and even some "soul-sharing". It is the lack of this in many organisations that leads to isolation and de-motivation. A good team structure can benefit all staff, it is caring and supportive and I certainly would recommend it.

Notes and References

1. CLAIM Report 36, *Staffing Structure in Public Libraries: A Case Study of Cumbrian County Library*, P. Lazell Ward, Loughborough University, 1984.
2. Audit Commission Review, *Cumbria County Library*, 1984, commented that the service was well managed.
3. Office of Arts and Libraries Report 1989, Internal.
4. Burns, T. and Stalker, G.M., *The Management of Innovation*, Tavistock, 1964. The importance of organic systems.
5. Smith, J.S., "Living in Interesting Times", *SLA Conference Proceedings 1982*, pp. 37-64. Analysis of leadership and the concept of Socratic leadership, see also[8].
6. Belbin, R.M., *Management Teams, Why They Succeed or Fail*, Heinemann, 1981.
7. Maslow, A., *Motivation and Personality*, 2nd ed., 1970. See chapter on Self-Actualisation, Ch. 11, pp. 49-80.
8. Smith, J.S., "Ready, Aim, Fire", *Modern Management*, March 1987. Written to establish the principles of management for the County Library.