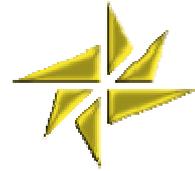




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The impact of leadership on Library quality: Outcomes of a benchmarking project between ATN libraries

Abstract

In the context of a university library, 'quality management' encompasses planning, service evaluation, performance monitoring, client satisfaction, continuous improvement and, most importantly, the relationships and interactions between these. This paper will discuss the outcomes of a benchmarking project undertaken in 2005-2006 by the university Libraries of the Australian Technology Network (LATN), which aimed to establish best practice in quality management within ATN libraries. While the project achieved its objective of establishing best practice, its outcomes have also highlighted that leadership plays a key role – from the conception to the embedding – in a library's quality management program and 'culture of quality'. The influence of the library leader (university librarian or equivalent) is unequivocal in the effectiveness of a library's quality management program. Outcomes of the LATN benchmarking project also illustrate that the leadership displayed by others is pivotal in the success of a library's quality management program. All Library staff (including a library's assigned 'quality officer'), supervisors and managers, and a university's various central administration groups, can each display initiative and direction in the area of quality management and thereby influence – in various ways – the structure, success and future development of a library's quality management program.

Introduction

During late 2005 to early 2006, the Libraries of the Australian Technology Network (LATN) undertook a Benchmarking Project which aimed to establish best practice in quality assurance across member libraries. (The participating libraries comprised: Auckland University of Technology Library; Curtin University of Technology Library; Queensland University of Technology Library; RMIT Library; University of South Australia Library; and University of Technology Sydney Library.)

For the purposes of the Project, 'quality assurance' was considered as encompassing planning, service evaluation, performance monitoring, client satisfaction, continuous improvement and the relationships and interactions between these. The Project established best practice in these areas across the LATN group, and identified a number of exemplars to illustrate, as a snapshot in time, how best practice had been, or was being, implemented within ATN libraries (Tang & Levinge, 2006).

This paper takes the findings of the LATN Quality Assurance Benchmarking Project and uses them to examine a number of theories of leadership and their applicability to quality assurance. The leadership theories examined include the traditional, with their emphasis on the "top-down" role of the university librarian, and newer approaches emphasising upwards and horizontal leadership and the role of library staff and stakeholders.

Defining Quality Assurance and Best Practice

For the purposes of the LATN Benchmarking Project, the International Standards Organisation's definition of quality was adopted, i.e. 'the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on the library's ability to satisfy stated or implied needs' (ISO 11620).

Building on this definition and emphasising 'totality' and the holistic nature of quality, quality assurance within the Benchmarking Project was defined as encompassing:

- Quality frameworks - formal or informal/internally developed;
- Responsibility for quality assurance;
- Planning – strategic and operational;
- Performance monitoring and measurement;
- Client charters/service level agreements;
- Client suggestion/feedback mechanisms;
- Other evaluation and assessment mechanisms; and
- Communication with, and reporting to, library staff, clients and other stakeholders.

In terms of establishing best practice across the LATN group, the Project used Wilson, Pitman, and Trahn's (1999, p.59) recommended definition from their *Guidelines for the Application of Best Practice in Australian University Libraries*:

The pursuit of world class performance. It is the way in which the most successful organisations manage and organise their

operations. It is a moving target. As the leading organisations continue to improve, the 'best practice' goalposts are constantly moving. The concept of continuous improvement is integral to the achievement of best practice.

This definition is particularly useful as it emphasises the changeability of best practice. By the time this paper has been published, ATN libraries will have continued their program of continuous improvements and set new standards in quality assurance. The Wilson, Pitman and Trahn definition serves as a reminder that benchmarking for best practice can only provide insight as a snapshot in time.

The LATN Quality Assurance Benchmarking Project methodology

The LATN group undertook the Benchmarking Project to review current practice in quality assurance across ATN libraries, draw out examples of best practice, and identify gaps and possible areas for improvement within their libraries. The Project was conducted by the quality officers of two of the ATN libraries, Curtin University of Technology and Queensland University of Technology.

The methodology for the Project included a literature review focusing on the quality of library quality assurance programs. Overall, it found that there is a general lack of literature covering this specific topic. Few have benchmarked the quality assurance initiatives and processes employed within academic libraries, or have attempted to measure the quality of a library's quality assurance program in its totality.

A questionnaire was devised to obtain an initial description of ATN libraries' quality assurance processes in relation to key aspects of quality assurance programs (as listed above). Completed questionnaires formed the basis of the subsequent in-person interviews with university librarians and 'quality officers' (or equivalent). The interviews aimed to allow the Project reviewers to clarify information raised in the questionnaire responses, and to explore relevant issues in greater depth. All libraries also provided copies of relevant documentation and website resources. These were considered in conjunction with the information provided within the questionnaire responses and within the follow up interviews.

The Project's Final Report (Tang & Levinge, 2006) provided examples of best practice in quality assurance processes within ATN libraries. Selected exemplars, as identified within the Final Report, will be used throughout this paper to demonstrate the relationship between leadership and library quality.

Leadership in the Quality Context

The relationship between quality and leadership has been well-documented. As Avolio (1994, p. 129) summarises, "At least 9 of Deming's 14 principles refer to leadership and its importance to achieving total quality. Crosby, Juran, and other quality gurus also place a great deal of emphasis in their writings on leadership and its effects on quality". Reviewing major international quality award programs (including the Australian Business Excellence Awards), Evans & Dean (2003, p. 80) also notes that leadership features prominently in all of the world's major awards. Similarly, UK researchers Kaye

and Anderson (1999, p. 489) “carried out a literature review to ascertain the key criteria that need to be in place for an organisation to achieve and, more importantly, sustain continuous improvement”. Leadership was the first of five “important and common themes” that were identified.

In these contexts, the concept of ‘leadership’ is generally consistent with traditional theories of leadership, which refer to leaders as *individuals* in management or executive positions (e.g. Goestch & Davis, 2006). Similarly, traditional theories address leadership traits and behaviours as *belonging to individuals*, such as Kouzes and Posner’s popular model of five exemplary leadership practices: challenging the process; inspiring a shared vision; enabling others to act; modelling the way; and encouraging the heart (1995, p.9). Lakshman’s recent research on leadership specifically in the context of quality management (2006, p. 42) confirms this:

...founders of the [quality] movement view quality as the ultimate and inescapable responsibility of top management. There seems to be a strong consensus among the founders of the quality movement as far as the importance of leadership to managing quality is concerned, as evidenced by their writings (Crosby, 1979; Deming, 1986; Feigenbaum, 1983; Juran, 1994), with all of these founders viewing quality as a leadership responsibility...

Others have continued to take the approach of these quality founders. Evans and Dean (2003, p. 26) suggest that “Leadership for quality is the responsibility of top management...”

while Johnson (1993, p. 41) states “Leadership powers every quality program that works, and it must begin at and be driven from the top...Make no mistake, leadership from top to bottom is the necessary precursor of quality”. The findings of the LATN Benchmarking Project outlined below support the view that the influence of the library leader (university librarian or equivalent) is indeed critical in the effectiveness of a library’s quality management program.

A common approach to leadership today is ‘distributed’ or ‘participative’ leadership in which all employees ‘share the power’. Earlier and traditional versions of this approach (which has also been labelled ‘dispersed’ and ‘collaborative’) indicate that the leadership is indirect, that power is *delegated* to other staff as a management responsibility, and that they are given authorisation by the leader-manager to make decisions (Yammino, 1994; Avolio, 1994). However, more recent interpretations of this theory suggest that participative leadership is “non-directive” and that all staff are empowered and “readily accept responsibilities for solutions, goals and strategies...” (Goetsch & Davis, 2006, p. 266). The LATN Benchmarking Project found several instances of both interpretations of ‘distributed’ leadership, that is, of delegated leadership and of individuals and individual groups not just participating or ‘getting involved’ in quality activities but demonstrating leadership (upwards and horizontally) through leadership behaviours such as “modelling the way” and “inspiring a shared vision” (Kouzes & Posner, 1995).

Beyond this approach, an even broader, less researched perspective on leadership suggests that, in addition to being distributed throughout an organisation, and occurring in all directions (not just top-down), leadership is shared with key external stakeholders or collaborative partners. Puffer and McCarthy (1996) adopted this approach in their research of 'leadership in a TQM context'. They proposed a framework based on 'stakeholder theory', which was developed in 1984 by R.E. Freeman, and which is generally applied within management literature, rather than to leadership theories. Unlike traditional theories of leadership which focus on *individuals*, this approach focuses on behaviours and activities. It is consistent with Tate's suggestion (2004, p. 301) that "Fresh thinking about leadership and how best to improve it requires a mental separation of leadership from leaders... This shifts the focus onto the *activity* of leadership more than its *personification*".

The framework developed by Puffer and McCarthy (1996, p. 113) creates a relationship between stakeholders and leadership specifically in a TQM context. The framework is illustrated as a series of concentric circles and builds on traditional leadership theories by placing well-documented leadership traits at the heart of the framework (i.e. creating a vision to promote change; innovation; and risk-taking). Extending outwards from this core are several leader activities (e.g. problem-solving; motivating; networking; informing) within four clusters of leader behaviours (i.e. giving and seeking information; making decisions; influencing people; and building relationships). The outermost

circle contains broad stakeholder groups which "exert influence upon and within an organisation such that they should be considered as integral parts of the organisation" in the context of quality management. These groups include, amongst others, customers; competitors; shareholders; and public interest groups.

While the LATN Benchmarking Project did not focus on all the extended group of stakeholders proposed within Puffer and McCarthy's framework, its findings do highlight that leadership in the context of quality is often sourced and exerted beyond and across the boundaries of the academic library.

The Impact of Leadership on ATN libraries' Quality Assurance ***Leadership by the University Librarian***

The outcomes of the LATN Benchmarking Project demonstrate that the relationship between the university librarian's leadership and the effectiveness of a library's quality assurance program is unequivocal. Without the support of the library leader, a library's quality assurance is unlikely to be successful. Executive commitment and involvement is integral to the success of any organisational priority, and quality assurance is no exception: there is a clear relationship between the library leader's leadership and a library's quality assurance. Two examples from the LATN Benchmarking Project that offer clear evidence of the critical role of the university librarian are detailed here.

The first example relates to the use of an overarching 'Performance Framework', which was identified as Best Practice by the LATN Project. The

exemplary Performance Framework in use within one of the ATN libraries forms the cornerstone of that library's quality assurance program. It documents and details the variety of performance measurement mechanisms employed by the library (such as strategic targets and measures, operational statistics, client feedback evaluations, etc) and their management (responsibilities, information and data locations, timing, etc).

The introduction of this Performance Framework was due solely to the vision of the University Librarian who recognised the need to consolidate existing quality assurance initiatives when she joined the Library some years ago. Translating the vision into reality, the subsequent development and implementation of the Performance Framework has guided the Library's quality maturity, making quality more explicit within the Library, engaging more managers to prioritise quality, and providing direction for all Library staff. In terms of Kouzes and Posner's (1995) popular leadership model and the five "fundamental practices of exemplary leadership", this example demonstrates the leadership behaviours of 'inspiring a shared vision' and 'enabling others to act'.

A second example from the LATN Benchmarking Project demonstrates how the University Librarian's leadership can be exerted not just 'top-down' within the library but beyond library boundaries and in an upwards direction. In terms of planning, the LATN Benchmarking Project identified *genuine* alignment of library plans with university goals as Best Practice. This is also a library benchmark documented by

McKinnon, Walker and Davis within their benchmarking manual for Australian universities (2000, p. 118). However, the LATN Project indicated that it was common to have a 'disconnect' between a library's strategic planning processes, and those of the division (or larger organisational group) of which the library is a part. Alignment is often contrived and formulaic to meet university requirements, rather than genuine.

At another ATN Library, the Library Director sought to find a constructive solution to the conflicting approaches of top-down and bottom-up planning. After initiating a dialogue *between* the departments within the Division, as well as lobbying Divisional decision-makers to adopt a more collaborative approach to planning, the Division has now adapted its planning cycle and, in 2006, will trial a new approach. According to Kouzes and Posner's (1995) model of exemplary leadership practices, this example highlights how leadership behaviours such as 'challenging the process' and 'inspiring a shared vision' can impact on quality management initiatives.

Distributed/participative leadership

The LATN Benchmarking Project found a number of applications of 'distributed' or 'participative' leadership, according to both the traditional 'delegated leadership' theory and the more recent 'non-directive' leadership theory. These approaches are illustrated by the way the ATN libraries assign responsibility for quality. Within the LATN group, there are generally three approaches to quality responsibility: a centralised quality officer; within a particular

manager's portfolio; or devolved to all staff.

Libraries with a centralised quality officer demonstrate distributed, delegated leadership. In these cases, the quality officer is delegated the authority they require to coordinate quality management across the entire organisation, and to maintain and mature the library's quality assurance program. Several of the exemplary practices found by the Benchmarking Project emanated from libraries which had adopted this model of responsibility for quality assurance. Examples include the templates developed by one Library to ensure planning initiatives are clearly scoped and their resource implications (staff, finance and information technology) identified; the wall chart and scorecard developed by another Library to effectively communicate plans and performance to Library staff; and the systematic monitoring of library performance against a client charter adopted by both these libraries.

While the Benchmarking Project considered the centralised model as best practice during the *early stages* of a quality assurance program, at least one Library has effectively implemented a devolved approach as its *ongoing* model. Its University Librarian argues that: "quality should permeate each team leader's approach and...there is an expectation that all individual ... Library staff members are responsible for continuous improvement" (Tang & Levinge 2006, p. 12). The approach adopted by this Library truly distributes the responsibility for quality-related leadership and encourages staff at all levels within the Library to embrace quality assurance processes. Although

the Library has only recently adopted a four-step quality cycle of Plan-Do-Review-Improve, the University Librarian argues that Library staff have done this for some time by continually looking for improvements in how they work (Tang & Levinge, 2006, p. 21).

This ATN Library is also notable for its approach to involving staff in its strategic planning. The Benchmarking Project found that a special event (something marked and out of the ordinary) dedicated to strategic planning is Best Practice and that this process of shaping the library's future should involve not just managers, but also staff. At the Library using the devolved model of responsibility for quality assurance, between 30 and 40 staff chose to attend and participate in the Library's 2005 planning day. In Kouzes and Posner's (1995) terms, these staff were doing more than simply 'getting involved'. They were leading horizontally by actively demonstrating to their fellow staff members their commitment to, and the influence they could have on, the Library's future.

Leadership by individual staff members

Individual staff members can also drive improvements and inform Best Practice within libraries. An example from the LATN Benchmarking Project which illustrates this relates to client evaluation activities (e.g. surveys) and communicating the results back to clients. The Project found that the implementation and achievement of a predetermined target time for reporting back to clients is Best Practice. There were significant differences between ATN libraries in this area, but one Library was identified as exemplary due

to its documented commitment to reporting back to clients within six weeks of their survey feedback being received. This undertaking is the result of an individual staff member from the corporate communications area who is “very concerned about providing ‘live’, timely feedback to clients” (Tang & Levinge, 2006, p. 19). Consequently, she “chases up” team leaders and managers for relevant information to ensure clients receive feedback in a timely manner. By ‘modelling the way’ (Kouzes & Posner, 1995), this dedicated staff member demonstrates upwards and horizontal leadership in her Library.

Group/team leadership

Leadership can be demonstrated not only by individuals but by groups or functional teams within a library. An example that emerged from the LATN Benchmarking Project demonstrates how one organisational unit can provide horizontal leadership and how the culture of quality can permeate the daily operations of a particular library team. The Report found that most libraries collect or have at their disposal a vast array of statistics, but not many use this data effectively to review and improve performance in targeted areas. At one Library however, one of the functional teams has developed a simple but innovative approach to its performance measurement. This team jointly developed a range of quality assurance performance targets relevant to their area, for example throughput times and volumes. These are constantly monitored and openly communicated among team members by being recorded by team members on a staff whiteboard. This simple approach ensures that measurement is up-to-date and that staff “have active measures

and standards that staff can relate to and engage with”. This is an example of a group embracing and embedding within their operations, a quality culture, and thereby ‘modelling the way’ (Kouzes & Posner, 1995) for other groups.

Stakeholder leadership

The LATN Benchmarking Project also found instances of stakeholder leadership, as proposed by Puffer and McCarthy (1996). One example is leadership from clients. All ATN libraries seek *indirect* client participation in planning, for example, via client evaluation activities, the outcomes of which are integrated back in to the planning process. However, one Library demonstrates the priority it places on seeking leadership from its clients via its library advisory committee, which consists of three senior library managers, faculty nominees, the Deputy Vice Chancellor, and two students. Part of the Committee’s responsibility is advising on future library and information services, and making recommendations regarding Library policy issues and information resource requirements.

According to the Puffer and McCarthy (1996) framework, this example demonstrates a number of leadership behaviours including ‘giving and seeking information’ (in relation to client needs); ‘building and maintaining relationships’ (by listening to clients and considering their interests); and ‘decision-making’ (through consultation with clients and enabling them to contribute to the Library’s future).

Before concluding, it should be noted that the LATN Benchmarking Project,

overall, is itself a demonstration of stakeholder leadership. It was an information-sharing exercise providing an insight into “how other organisations are undertaking processes” (Wilson, Pitman & Trahn, 2000, p. A2) and identifying process ‘leaders’ whose success could inform continuous improvement efforts. It was about learning from the leaders, and in the case of the LATN Benchmarking Project, leadership was displayed by each of the ATN libraries in different areas and in different ways. As a stakeholder group, the collaborative LATN group can source leadership from each of the member libraries, that is, beyond the organisational boundaries of any one library.

In the context of the Puffer and McCarthy (1996) framework, this example demonstrates the leadership behaviour of ‘building and maintaining relationships’. Puffer and McCarthy (1996, p. 121) suggest relationship building can be achieved through ‘supporting’ which was “long considered a one-way managerial activity directed at subordinates [but] the activity can be broadened to include mutually supportive behaviour among organisational members and with stakeholders”. Similarly, ‘networking’ by “developing contacts with people who are sources of information and support, and maintaining relationships through periodic interactions” can be extended beyond the organisational boundaries to key stakeholders and collaborative partners.

The stakeholder theory of leadership underpins this paper’s efforts to provide leadership to ALIA and the library community. This is demonstrated by a

desire to continue the profession’s advancement by encouraging all within it to take a leadership role, regardless of their ‘official’ authority or hierarchical position, and to seek leadership not just from those managers or executives in formal positions of authority. Within Puffer and McCarthy’s framework, this paper demonstrates the leadership behaviour of ‘giving and seeking information’ and more specifically, the empowering leadership activity of “informing people about decisions, plans and activities to assist them in their work and their own decision making” (Puffer & McCarthy, 1996, p. 120).

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the impact of leadership on library quality assurance via selected Best Practice exemplars from the LATN Quality Assurance Benchmarking Project. It has highlighted that leadership plays a key role in a library’s quality management program and ‘culture of quality’. Moreover, it has shown that leadership can be demonstrated by *the* library leader, other individuals and groups within the organisation, and by external stakeholders and collaborative partners. In terms of quality assurance and the various components encompassed within it (e.g. planning, performance measurement, etc), leadership can be demonstrated in the traditional top-down structure, but can also be upwards or horizontal across an academic library’s internal and external boundaries. It has also provided some evidence of the applicability of the stakeholder theory of leadership to library quality management. However further research is needed to examine the extended group of stakeholders proposed within

Puffer and McCarthy's (1996) framework.

In terms of quality assurance practice within libraries, this paper recommends that all members of the ALIA community seek leadership and demonstrate

leadership in top-down, upwards and horizontal directions. It is possible for everyone involved within a library to pursue quality and to actively seek to influence decisions and behaviours of those around them, within their organisation and outside of it.

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