

# Reaching Beyond the Summit: Are We Creating Work Environments for People to Thrive?

*Gail M. Staines*

This paper presents the results of an exploratory study on the degree to which library leaders in U.S. and Canadian ARL libraries as well as comparable academic libraries in the U.K., Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Australia, and New Zealand are creating work environments for people to thrive. Continuing this author's research in the areas of Appreciative Inquiry, positive emotions, and strength-based organizations, this study set-out to uncover what, if any, specific strategies library deans and directors are using to engage their employees to rise to their fullest potential at work. This includes both physical meeting spaces as well as interventions to encourage librarian and library staff engagement.

Library administrators are leading in difficult times. Generational, social, cultural, environmental, and economic issues abound. Change continues to happen at a very rapid pace. New technologies, downsizing/rightsizing, multitasking, and reconfigured job descriptions are resulting in a heightened emphasis on continuous learning and performance. Employees are required to keep a-pace with how people use libraries. People's reaction to change in their workplace varies. Some people adapt well to change and look forward to

the challenges of learning something new. Others may address change incrementally by selecting the tasks they enjoy doing most and not seeing change holistically. Sometimes individuals do not see the need to change, wanting to maintain the status quo.

As leaders, we use tried-and-true methods to get staff engaged and energized about their work. We also need to discover new and emerging methods that may be more effective. To what level is the leadership in our profession moving in this direction? Through quantitative and qualitative analysis of survey results, this study provides insight into the level at which current library deans and directors are working with existing and new models to create and maintain quality work environments.

This original research on Appreciative Inquiry in the field of academic librarians is brand new. It follows the research line of inquiry of the author who presented a session on this topic for the ACRL/LAMA Joint Spring Virtual Institute (Spring 2008) as well as the article "The Promise of Appreciative Inquiry in Library Organizations," by Maureen Sullivan.<sup>1</sup>

The intended impact of this research is for readers to learn about the current library environment and

---

*Gail M. Staines, Ph.D. is Assistant Provost for University Libraries at Saint Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri USA, e-mail: gstaines@slu.edu*

if new methods of engaging employees during challenging times are being implemented as methods of problem solving and planning for the future.

### Literature Review

The literature that informs this study comes both from the world of librarianship as well as the world around it. This exploratory study concerns the human components as well as the physical spaces of creating work environments for people to thrive.

Research on Appreciative Inquiry, positive emotions, and strength-based organizations guides our understanding of work environments that are effective in getting employees to reach and move beyond their full potential. Through the discovery of Appreciative Inquiry, David Cooperrider found that the approach individuals take to solving problems or creating new ideas and solutions is directly impacted by the approach itself.<sup>2</sup> Cooperrider found that if physicians gave a diagnosis in a positive manner with a variety of options the patient would have a better chance of improving their health condition as opposed to having the diagnosis and prognosis presented in negative terms with little or no options. Work by Buckingham reveals that people who know their strengths and use these strengths are more successful at affecting change than those who do not.<sup>3</sup> Seligman discovered that being optimistic makes you smarter and increases your social and physical resources as well as how long you live.<sup>4</sup> Extremely optimistic people are very engaged in their work and life. These three areas of research – Appreciative Inquiry, positive emotions, and strength-based organizations – provides evidence that when one, two, or all three are present in the workplace, the place of employment becomes an environment within which people can work at or above their potential.

Moreover, literature in the scope of organizational development methods, were consulted. In their article, “Motivation and Productivity,” Ugah and Okpara (2008) review theories of motivation including Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, Equity Theory, Expectancy Theory, and Herzberg’s Two-Factor Theory.<sup>5</sup> These researchers conclude that library leaders need to work with staff to identify each employees’ potential and apply relevant motivational methods.

Selection of the more recognizable organizational development methods required a review of the literature on the following interventions. German-born psychologist Kurt Lewin, as early contributor

to the concept of Change Management, proposed a three-part process to change that included “freezing,” experiencing change, then “unfreezing.”<sup>6</sup> Appreciative Inquiry, discussed above, was founded by David Cooperrider of Case Western University. Stephen R. Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, postulates that, by implementing the seven habits, an individual can reach their true potential.<sup>7</sup> The Balance Scorecard (Kaplan and Norton) aims to capture the complete picture of an organization in terms of operations, marketing, financial inputs and outputs, to see if daily activities match overall goals.<sup>8</sup> Although the origin of Total Quality Management (TQM) is not absolute, the elements of TQM focus on the goal of achieving quality in all aspects of work.<sup>9</sup> First appearing in the 1930’s in *Applied Imagination* (Osborn), brainstorming is basically people getting together to generate ideas.<sup>10</sup> Management by Objectives (MBO) is a process whereby a group of people agree on specific objectives to gain a broader understanding of their role in an organization.<sup>11</sup> Emotional Intelligence is the ability of an individual to self-assess and monitor one’s own emotions, and those of others for successful work outcomes.<sup>12</sup>

In response to flattening the hierarchical structure of an organization and getting employees more engaged, the team approach seeks to bring people with different strengths to work on a specific project or in a particular area, such as information literacy or collection management.<sup>13</sup> The phrase “360 degrees feedback” is the registered trademark of TEAMS, Inc.<sup>14</sup> Conducting research over 15 years, TEAMS, Inc. discovered that seeking input from an employee’s peers, supervisor, direct reports, and others – the 360 degree review process – enables a manager or leader to make more informed decisions.<sup>15</sup>

The goal of this literature review was to identify well-known organizational development methods. All of the methods described have pros and cons regarding theory and implementation. The purpose was not to do a comparative analysis of these interventions, but rather to provide participants with options that they would more aptly be familiar with and, thus, be able to make an informed response to the related question in the survey. Respondents were provided with the option to write-in other methods they used that were not listed.

Determining what, if any, impact the physical workplace has on employee satisfaction and produc-

tivity has been researched for many years. Results of studies attempting to uncover what, if any impact a physical workspace has on employee satisfaction and productivity continue to be mixed. In his landmark study, Sommer (1969) found that “no simple relationship between single environmental elements and complex human behavior” exists.<sup>16</sup> Even though a simple linkage between physical workspace and productivity has yet to be discovered, Isacco (1985) notes that a “well-designed office provides an atmosphere where people think, act, feel, work for one-third of every 24 hours, and do these things productively. In other words, it facilitates getting the job done.”<sup>17</sup> One of the most expansive studies conducted on this topic was the Buffalo Organization for Social and Technological Innovation (BOSTI) study.<sup>18</sup> Involving more than 10,000 workers over 4 years, this study found that aesthetics, noise level, lighting, privacy, and comfort all contribute to the level of employee job satisfaction and performance. Of particular interest is the finding that employee involvement in workspace design only occurred with 25% of study participants, even though worker participation in design significantly contributed to higher ratings across-the-board in measures of environmental and job satisfaction, and job performance.

The results of these studies are supported by recent research. Davies (2005) found that acoustic (noise level) and visual aesthetics in the workplace influence productivity and life outlook.<sup>19</sup> Both elements were found to impact employee engagement in work regardless of the type of workspace. Schwede, Davies, and Purdy (2007) discovered that effective workplace design requires employee input throughout the design process, whether it is renovation or new construction.<sup>20</sup>

The literature review conducted for this study is quite valuable. It informs us that if the confluence of Appreciative Inquiry, positive emotion, and strength-based organizations exists in a workplace, employees will be in an organizational environment where they can reach and/or move beyond their potential. It also presents a wide variety of other organizational development methods that might be effective in influencing worker engagement. Studies of workspace design indicate that there exists a level of connectivity between job performance and satisfaction, and the physical work environment. The impact of workspace on productivity and satisfaction at work is not

straightforward, but multifaceted. Acoustics, visual elements and including workers in workspace design are of primary importance for employees to reach a high level of performance, satisfaction, and engagement with their work.

### Research Methods

Twenty-six (21%) of the membership in the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) were randomly selected from 123 ARL members listed on the ARL website as of October 1, 2008. Eleven libraries from Canada (42%) and fifteen libraries from the U.S. (58%) comprise the total 26 ARL libraries in this study.

Additionally, primarily English-speaking countries listed on the UNESCO Libraries Portal/Academic & Research Libraries website, were randomly selected to participate in this study.<sup>21</sup> Two academic libraries out of 12 located in Ireland; and 10 libraries from the U.K.; 4 from Australia; 2 from New Zealand; and 1 from Wales for a total of 19 (13%) out of a total of 148 academic libraries were randomly selected. Collectively, this cohort is referred to in this study as “other countries.”

Library administrators from the selected libraries were contacted via e-mail between September and November 2008 and asked to complete a seven-question survey through [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com). The initial request was followed by two e-mail reminders. The survey included a mix of both quantitative (i.e., multiple choice) and qualitative (i.e., requiring written answers) questions.

### Limitations of this Study

As with all research, there are some limitations to this study. Quantitative and qualitative information was gathered electronically. As a result, survey responses lacked the face-to-face interaction between the researcher and respondent thereby losing non-verbal cues useful to data analysis.

Only ARL libraries were used in this study. The results of this study are generalizable to other ARL libraries and like-ARL libraries. However, results may be less generalizable or not generalizable at all to other types of libraries, such as school, public, special, and smaller academic libraries.

This study was conducted in a compressed time frame of approximately five months. As such, longitudinal analysis was not possible. Future researchers

may consider conducting a similar or expanded study over a longer time frame.

### **Results**

Eight (42%) out of 19 academic libraries in the “other countries” category and 21 (81%) out of 26 academic libraries in the U.S. and Canada completed this survey. Twenty-nine responses were received out of a total of 45 which results in a 64% response rate.

### ***Demographics***

Surveys were completed by top level academic library administrators, the target audience for this research. Respondents provided 10 different professional titles (i.e., University Librarian, Director of Libraries, Dean of Libraries, etc.), all serving in a top level library leadership position. Numbers of years of experience as a library administrator were as follows: 0-9 years experience (9 responses, 30%), 10-19 years (6 responses, 20%), 20-29 years (10 responses, 33%) and 30 years (4 responses, 13%). One individual (3%) did not answer this question. In this study, 15 respondents (52%) had 19 years or less experience as a library administrator and 14 (48%) had 20-30 years experience.

### ***Meeting Spaces***

As indicated in the literature review, the physical environment where you meet can impact job productivity and satisfaction. In this study it was discovered that, for U.S. and Canadian respondents, meetings were held in the same place that had good lighting and comfortable seating (44%) and that when meeting places changed, they were moved to similarly enjoyable locations (44%). Sixty percent of the respondents from other countries indicated that meetings were held in the same place that had not been renovated or refreshed in many years.

When asked to describe the ideal meeting space, the responses were generally the same. Characteristics of quality meeting spaces include: open and flexible space, good lighting, technology rich, refreshment facilities, moveable tables and chairs, fresh air, windows, conveniently located, quiet, clean, and comfortable.

### ***Engaging Employees***

Survey participants were asked to respond to questions regarding methods they are currently using to engage employees in their work as well as to indicate strategies that have failed. Questions concerning

group selection, tenor of meetings, types of organizational development strategies used as well as those discarded, and examples of methods that are successful in engaging faculty and staff in the workplace.

When queried how librarians and staff were identified to work in a group (i.e., committee, task force, etc.) a majority of the time, most respondents indicated that they select group members based on their experience (60% of US/Canadian and 71% other countries). Next, 45% of US/Canadian and 57% of other countries said that they select members because they play a leadership role in the library, such as serving as a department chair or coordinator.

Differences emerged regarding department representation and asking for volunteers. Forty-five percent of US/Canadian ARL libraries in this study select members to represent their department as compared to 29% of academic libraries from other countries, while 43% of libraries from other countries asked for volunteers to serve on groups as compared to 20% of US/Canadian responses. Both groups (US/Canadian 20%, Other, 29%) indicated some selection based on the number of groups that each employee is already serving on.

Written comments regarding group selection were thematically similar. Most responses indicated that individuals were selected because of their creativity, resourcefulness, and had an “ability to get the work done” attitude. Library leaders expressed that groups were established with individuals based on their strengths (i.e., decision making ability, specific expertise, reliability) and that this was driven by the project at hand.

When asked to describe the majority of library meetings attended, most respondents (78% US/Canadian and 80% other countries) indicated that issues were discussed and brainstorming, sharing new ideas, and offering solutions occurred. Forty-four percent of US/Canadian responses and 20% from other countries said that they real meeting took place outside of the scheduled meeting in conversations before or after the scheduled meeting. Sixty percent of responses from other countries and 39% from US/Canadian library leaders noted that reports and updates were given, but there is little or no discussion. Moreover, 40% of other countries and 11% of US/Canadian responses stated that issues are discussed in most meetings, but that the discourse is usually negative.

**TABLE 1**  
**Responses to the Question: Have You Ever Used any of the Following as a Library Administrator?**

Organizational Development Method	US/Canadian ARL Libraries	Other Countries
Brainstorming	88.9%	50%
Change Management	72.2%	83%
Team Approach to Organization	61.1%	67%
Management by Objectives (Drucker)	55.6%	67%
Appreciative Inquiry	50%	0%
Total Quality Management (TQM)	50%	33%
360 degree review	38.9%	17%
Emotional Intelligence	33.3%	17%
Seven Habits (Covey)	33.3%	17%
Balanced Scorecard	27.8%	17%

Table 1 shows the responses to the question: Have you ever used any of the following as a library administrator?

Other methods used but not listed in Table 1 include: Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), futur-ing, SWOT analysis, strategic planning, Learning Organizations (Senge), and systems thinking (Centre for Strategic Change Management).

When asked, "Of the concepts listed in Table 1, which ones did you abandon and why?" most responses said that the method was too time consuming and, if implemented, too difficult to sustain. One respondent said, "Appreciative Inquiry is a difficult process to engage our staff in." Another said that Total Quality Management (TQM) put staff off because it was too much like industry. Two participants stated that the Balanced Scorecard was useful, however this method required a lot of data and a commitment to assessment. In the end it was determined to be too complex and time consuming to be useful. Management By Objectives (MBO) was said to be too narrowly focused unless it was specifically implemented within strategic planning that includes values and performance indicators in the plan itself. A response from a library leader located outside the US and Canada mentioned that, for political or organizational culture reasons on campus, a particular method would need to be implemented.

Communication, recognition, and professional development plans and opportunities emerged as themes from qualitative responses to stating methods

library leaders use to engage employees so that they can work to their full potential. Thirty-eight responses were coded as related to communication, recognition, and professional development plans and opportunities. Communication emerged as the number one method used to engage employees with 17 responses (45%), followed by professional development plans and opportunities with 15 responses (40%), and lastly by recognition with 6 responses (16%).

Asking questions, seeking opinions, fostering a safe environment for discussion, and clearly articulating expectations were communications strategies successfully used by library leaders in this study to engage employees. In terms of recognition, responses included rewarding success, recognizing achievements, positive reinforcement, encouragement, and lots of praise were found to be effective.

Library leaders indicated that faculty and staff were more engaged in their work if each employee had a professional development plan. The plan may include opportunities to learn new skills, have special assignments to complete, include reachable and stretch goals, and matching employees' strengths with projects to be completed.

## Discussion

A few initial areas have emerged in this exploration into what it takes to create work environments for people to thrive in ARL and ARL-like libraries. Respondents from all over the world provided a list of similar items needed to create the ideal meeting space. Prime meeting spaces include excellent lighting, open space with flexible furnishings, current technologies, conveniently located with refreshment facilities – basically a clean, comfortable, and quiet area. In reality, 56% of US/Canadian and 60% of other countries are meeting in less than ideal spaces – spaces that have not been renovated or refreshed in many years – as well as holding meetings in these same spaces time after time. Since the literature clearly demonstrates that physical surroundings can have a positive or negative impact on employee engagement at work, library leaders that continue to meet in tired and worn surroundings strongly need to consider a space refresh. As well,

meeting in different locations may contribute to better outcomes.

In terms of group composition, a majority (60% US/Canadian and 71% other countries) of respondents selected group members based on their experience followed by the leadership role that the individual plays within the library, such as serving as a department chair or coordinator. Differences occurred regarding department representation on groups as well as seeking group volunteers. Forty-five percent of US/Canadian selected individuals to represent their department on a group whereas 29% of other countries used this criterion. Forty-three percent of libraries from other countries asked for volunteers to serve while the same was true for 20% of US/Canadian libraries. It is not initially known why these differences emerged. However, it is clear that library leaders from all respondents select group members based on an individual's work ethic and positive attitude.

The level of discourse in meetings is a contributor to workplace engagement. A majority of respondents (78% US/Canadian, 80% other countries) said that meetings used active techniques of brainstorming, sharing ideas, and offering solutions that show that methods to get employees engaged in work are being used. A small percentage (44% US/Canadian and 20% other countries) indicated the real discussions took place outside the scheduled meeting; that reports were given, but there was little or no discussion (60% other countries, 39% US/Canadian), and some (40% other countries, 11% US/Canadian) reported discourse was usually negative. Engagement techniques used depends upon the type of meeting itself (i.e., Is it a meeting to share information? To problem solve? etc.). This initial study reveals that although most respondents are actively employing engagement strategies, there exists a level of negative discussion, or no discussion at all, which is the antithesis of creating a fruitful work environment.

Respondents had tried various organizational development strategies, but none emerged as being the most effective and widely used method for engaging employees. As Table 1 shows, a majority of respondents were familiar with brainstorming, Change Management, team approach to organization, and Management by Objectives; and less with Total Quality Management, 360-degree review, Emotional Intelligence, Seven Habits, and the Balanced Scorecard. No respondents from other countries indicated knowl-

edge of Appreciative Inquiry. Qualitative responses to organizational development methods were that most strategies were too much like industry, too time consuming and challenging to implement long term.

Most interesting is that all participants provided methods used effectively to engage employees, none of which were all inclusive under the moniker of a specific strategy. Communicating with employees, giving staff recognition in a variety of ways, and working with each employee to create an individual professional development plan were given as ways library leaders consistently used to engage employees to work to their full potential.

### Conclusion

This was an exploratory study to attempt to gain an understanding of what strategies library leaders in ARL and ARL-like libraries are using to engage employees to work to their fullest potential, both in terms of physical spaces and human interventions. Results may be generalizable to ARL and ARL-like libraries and may/may not be generalizable to other types of libraries.

Results of this study captured a glimpse into physical meeting spaces, selection of group members, level of discourse in meetings, familiarity with types of organizational development strategies, and effective methods for engaging employees at work. Most respondents indicated the need for a clean, quiet, and comfortable environment to hold meetings in as ideal. Group selection was primarily based on an individual's experience, leadership role within the library, and work ethic. In reality, many participants are meeting in less than desirable spaces and sometimes having negative discussions, or little or no discussion during meetings. Refreshing space and keeping conversations positive are needed to keep staff engaged and working toward their potential.

Probably the most revealing aspect of this study is that, even though participants were familiar with a number of well-known organizational development methods and may have used the interventions over their career as a library leader, the methods were found to be too time consuming, more applicable to the corporate world, and not sustainable. Library leaders in this study found communication, recognition, and professional development plans to be the most effective in getting employees to work to their fullest potential.

## Notes

1. Sullivan, Maureen. 2004. The promise of Appreciative Inquiry in library organizations. *Library Trends* 53: 218-29.
2. Cooperrider, David, and Diana Whitney. 2005. *Appreciative Inquiry: A positive revolution in change*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
3. Buckingham, Marcus. *Go put your strengths to work*. NY: Free Press, 2007.
4. Seligman, Martin. *Authentic happiness*. NY: Free Press, 2004.
5. Ugah, Akobundu Dike, and Michael Okpara. 2008. Motivation and productivity in the library. *Library Philosophy and Practice*, June: 1-6.
6. Marrow, Alfred J. *The practical theorist: the life and work of Kurt Lewin*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1977.
7. Covey, Stephen R. 2004. *The seven habits of highly effective people: powerful lessons in personal change*. NY: Free Press.
8. Kaplan, Robert S., and David P. Norton. 1996. *The balanced scorecard: translating strategy into action*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
9. Besterfield, David H., Carol Besterfield-Michna, Glen Besterfield, and Mary Besterfield-Sacre. 2002. *Total quality management*. NY: Prentice Hall. See also: Riggs, Donald. 1993. Managing quality: TQM in libraries. *Library Administration and Management* 7 : 73-8. O'Neil, Rosanna M., Richard L. Harwood, and Bonnie A. Osif. 1993. A total look at TQM: A TQM perspective from the literature of business, industry, higher education, and librarianship. *Library Administration and Management* 7 : 244-54.
10. Osborn, Alex F. 1963. *Applied imagination: principles and procedures of creative problem solving*. NY: Charles Scribner's and Sons.
11. Drucker, Peter. 1954. *The practice of management*. NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers.
12. Goleman, Daniel. 1995. *Emotional intelligence: why it can matter more than IQ*. NY: Bantam.
13. Casey, D. 1985. When is a team not a team? *Personnel Management* 17: 26-9.
14. Edwards, M.R., and A.J. Ewen. 1996. *Providing 360-degree feedback: an approach to enhancing individual and organizational performance*. Scottsdale, AZ: American Compensation Association.
15. Cohen, Debra J. 1993. TEAMS 360 degrees feedback offers varied ways to create feedback surveys. *HR Magazine* 39: 1-4.
16. Sommer, R. 1969. *Personal space: the behavioral basis of design*. NY: Prentice Hall.
17. Isacco, J.M. 1985. Work spaces, satisfaction, and productivity in libraries. *Library Journal*, May 1.
18. Buffalo Organization for Social & Technological Innovation. n.d. *The impact of office environment for productivity and quality of working life*. Buffalo, NY: BOSTI.
19. Davies, H. 2005. Productivity and the knowledge worker. COBRA Construction Research Conference of the RICS and AUBEA Australian Universities Building educator's Association conference, July 4-8, in Brisbane, Australia.
20. Schwede, Davies, and Purdy. 2007. (need to verify this citation).
21. UNESCO. Libraries portal. <http://portal.unesco.org>