



5-2014

# “That’s How We Do Things Here:” Organizational Culture in Libraries

Jennifer A. Bartlett

University of Kentucky, [jen.bartlett@uky.edu](mailto:jen.bartlett@uky.edu)

**[Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)**

Follow this and additional works at: [https://uknowledge.uky.edu/libraries\\_facpub](https://uknowledge.uky.edu/libraries_facpub)

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

## Repository Citation

Bartlett, Jennifer A., ““That’s How We Do Things Here:” Organizational Culture in Libraries” (2014). *Library Faculty and Staff Publications*. 83.

[https://uknowledge.uky.edu/libraries\\_facpub/83](https://uknowledge.uky.edu/libraries_facpub/83)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Kentucky Libraries at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Faculty and Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact [UKnowledge@sv.uky.edu](mailto:UKnowledge@sv.uky.edu).

---

**“That’s How We Do Things Here:” Organizational Culture in Libraries**

**Notes/Citation Information**

Published in *Library Leadership & Management*, v. 28, no. 3, p. 1-6.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](#).

## New and Noteworthy

### “That’s How We Do Things Here:” Organizational Culture in Libraries

Jennifer A. Bartlett

My mother, a fifth grade teacher for 30 years and now retired, has always said that she can figure out within five minutes of walking into a school if the people who work there are satisfied or dissatisfied with their jobs. “It’s just a feeling I get,” she says, “if the place really works or not. Do the teachers care about the students? Does the front office care about the teachers? I can always tell.”

Of course, she’s talking about organizational (or corporate) culture, which can be loosely defined as a group’s shared beliefs, language, systems, values, assumptions and behaviors. An organization’s defining culture directly affects the way its members deal with each other and with the people it serves, and can manifest itself in a variety of ways (for example, in its initial, external “vibe”). The culture can be predominantly healthy or unhealthy, based on a variety of factors including its environment, history, management team and financial situation; further, each organization can have several “sub-cultures” delineated by departments or other groupings of its members. Given its fundamental importance to the workings of an organization, understanding the ebbs and flows of a library’s culture is essential for good management.

Edgar H. Schein, Professor of Management Emeritus at MIT’s Sloan School of Management, is a key author in the field of organizational culture, and began developing a conceptual model of the topic in the 1980’s. He presents a definition of organizational culture as “the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems.”<sup>1</sup> Although other definitions of organizational culture abound in the literature, Schein’s has become a baseline for many other studies.<sup>2</sup>

As a basic introduction to the topic, Schein’s *Organizational Culture and Leadership* is a seminal book discussing the concept of culture from a business management perspective.<sup>3</sup> Schein identifies three separate levels in organizational cultures: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions (24). Artifacts refer to visible, tangible elements and observed behaviors, espoused beliefs are the organization’s rules of behavior (such as those manifested in a strategic plan or mission statement), and assumptions are the embedded, internal beliefs and behaviors generally shared by an organization’s members.

The author then moves into a more in-depth discussion of the dimensions of culture, including external adaptation, internal integration, and cultural assumptions. The latter part of the book lays out the importance of the organization's leaders in nurturance and development: how they create, embed, transmit, and change the corporate culture. According to Schein, the leader plays a key role in shaping a group's dynamics to reach its goals. Not only are leaders key movers of an organization's culture, the culture they create directly impact what future types of initiatives can be accomplished.

*Organizational Culture and Leadership* is an excellent introduction to the topic, well-organized, well-written and clearly documented with numerous real-world examples from the author's own experience with businesses such as Ciba-Geigy, Digital Equipment Corporation, and Amoco.

Moving to a discussion from a library perspective, Jason Martin, Head of Public Services at Florida's Stetson University, offers a well-formulated, interesting cultural metaphor for organizational culture in libraries in a 2012 blog post<sup>4</sup> at *In The Library With the Lead Pipe*. In "That's How We Do Things Around Here" (incidentally, the inspiration for this column's title), Martin uses the academic library setting to present various "rites and rituals" affecting culture: "rites of enhancement," "rites of renewal," "rites of integration," and "rites of initiation." Rites of enhancement and initiation can be seen as "coming of age" rituals, as when librarians are promoted or achieve tenure; renewal can refer to staff development and training opportunities. Integration rites include events such as group-wide meetings, holiday parties, and so forth. Some rituals, such as faculty meetings, can involve elements of integration and renewal. Organizational culture, then, is an organic process that is not suddenly imposed from above, but gradually develops and matures over time, in a seasonal pattern. Supervisors can use this natural order to the organization's benefit, as when they ease the discomfort surrounding change by holding periodic meetings to provide an opportunity for discussion ("rite of integration"). Conversely, by cancelling a traditional holiday party ("rite of renewal") to save money, a library director can disrupt the order and cause grumbling and loss of morale. A key takeaway from Martin's blog post is that libraries are ultimately groups of people in a mini-society: "An organization is a collection of groups working to achieve goals and objectives through the use of a codified set of policies and procedures. More than that, an organization is a small society in which individuals come together and agree to adhere by the rules, practices, and accepted forms of behavior of the society/organization." Being aware of the ebbs and flows of that society is crucial to the organization's growth and development.

Another excellent reading involving academic libraries is the recently published collection of essays *Workplace Culture in Academic Libraries* edited by Kelly Blessinger and Paul L. Hrycai.<sup>5</sup> The book is meant to help define what cultural factors go into making a great academic library, and how those factors manifest themselves in daily work from a librarian's perspective. As the authors state, "this volume was compiled to review current workplace cultures in academic libraries and way to improve those cultures...contributions to this collection primarily discuss successful current programs pertaining to workplace cultures in academic libraries and place the discussion in a scholarly context, particularly by considering similar programs and/or the history of the topic as reviewed in the library literature" (1). By placing discussion of key topics in

a scholarly perspective, the result is thus more than a simple how-to guide. Topics include assessment, acclimation for new librarians, workforce diversity, physical environment, staff moral, interdepartmental communication, academic culture, mentoring and coaching, generational differences, motivation, and conflict management. Regardless of the type of library, organizational culture can have a major impact on attracting and retaining talented and committed employees.

Without ever invoking the phrase “organizational culture,” consultant Robert F. Moran Jr. offers his own personal reflection on what a supportive, vibrant workplace can look like in his 2009 article, “What a Great Place to Work.”<sup>6</sup> Organizations thrive when the goals of the organization and the needs of the employees mesh: “There needs to be regular, consistent congruence between library goals and the fulfillment of personal needs. It may be worth noting here that personally satisfying does not mean happy. Fulfilled, worth the effort, successful are more accurate understandings” (47).

Before taking any new job, it’s crucial to determine the organization’s culture. Stephanie Walker, in her “People Make Libraries” column in *The Bottom Line*,<sup>7</sup> addresses several factors that can predict a potential employee’s chances of success in a new position, and suggests ways to seek out basic information. Key issues include unionization, employee turnover, support for professional development, organizational hierarchy, faculty status of librarians, and funding structure. Interestingly, an additional factor Walker mentions is the library’s relation with the people responsible for information technology. As Walker writes, “IT is critical to today’s libraries, and the library’s relationship with those who provide technology services can have a major impact on the atmosphere and morale within the library” (116). Is IT part of the library, or does the library have a smooth working relationship with the IT department?<sup>8</sup>

Information technology is a good example of an area in libraries always subject to change, which can cause a certain amount of trepidation among library staff. In “Transforming the Academic Library: Creating an Organizational Culture that Fosters Staff Success,”<sup>9</sup> Canadian authors Carol Shepstone and Lyn Currie discuss strategies for improving organizational culture for staff at the University of Saskatchewan Library using the Competing Values Framework (CVF), developed by Kim S. Cameron and Robert E. Quinn.<sup>10</sup> The CVF measures four dominant culture types: clan, adhocracy, hierarchy, and market. Each type is measured on a continuum of stability and control to flexibility and discretion, as well as internal focus and integration to external focus and differentiation. A dominant “hierarchy” culture, for example, exhibits more stability and control and an internal focus and integration. By measuring an organization’s assumptions, orientations and values, the CVF model helps orient its current culture and points out opportunities for change. The Canadian study found that librarians at Saskatchewan preferred to move from their current Market and Hierarchy orientation to an Adhocracy-focused Clan culture, and presented an action plan to help make that transition.

A key theme throughout much of the literature on organizational culture is change. For tradition-oriented organizations that tend to be resistant to change, such as libraries, meaningful change can be enormously difficult.<sup>11</sup> Further, reluctance to change can have a direct effect on a

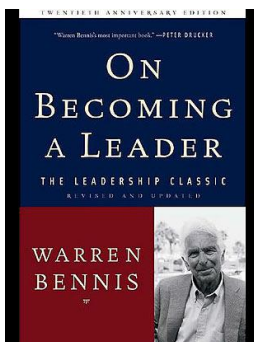
library's ability to recruit its future leadership. Another interesting study utilizing the CVF to analyze attitudes towards change is detailed in a July 2010 *College & Research Libraries* article, "Future Leaders' Views on Organizational Culture."<sup>12</sup> In this paper, researchers hypothesized that there is a correlation between upcoming leaders' satisfaction with their work environments and their overall perception of their own effectiveness. Findings based on analysis of survey data using the CVF were that future leaders want an organizational culture with more external focus and flexibility (less hierarchy, more adhocracy); current organizational structures limit future leaders' effectiveness; and that future leaders' dissatisfaction with their work environments will cause them to go in search of different work settings. The authors state, "Effective senior leadership is essential to any organizational culture change. The people whom these current leaders depend upon to help their organizations to become successful – the cohort of future leaders who were the focus of this study – will be key to the longer-term success of change across organizations and the profession. That is, if they stay in libraries" (335).

Library managers can gauge their organizational climate even without thorough tools such as the Competing Values Framework. Debbie Schachter, writing from a special library perspective,<sup>13</sup> briefly offers some basic strategies for understanding an organization's culture such as personal interviews and anonymous written surveys with staff, as well as reviewing the current mission and vision with them. Regardless of the tools used, it is essential for managers to take the pulse of their organizational culture in order to stay competitive.

Library leaders and managers have an important impact on organizational culture. Schachter observes in her article, "As the library leader, you should always be aware of your actions and model the behavior you expect of your staff. Ensure that the statements you make are consistent with the values and the symbols of the culture you would like to develop...it will make it a more pleasant culture for you and for your staff to be working in" (19). Hierarchy vs. adhocracy, internal focus vs. external focus, flexibility vs. inflexibility – where does your library fall on the spectrum? When your patrons and employees walk in the door of your library, what kind of experience would you like them to have?

\*\*\*\*\*

**From the Library Leadership Essentials Bookshelf:**



Bennis, Warren. 2009. *On Becoming a Leader*. New York: Basic Books.

For most of us, leadership does not come naturally. Especially in library work, we enter leadership roles from other specialties and with no formal management training. In *On Becoming a Leader*, now available in a tenth anniversary edition, Warren Bennis identifies key qualities that make a good leader: a guiding vision, maturity, curiosity, self-knowledge, and passion, among others. "I am surer now than ever," he writes, "that the process of becoming a leader is the same process that make a person a healthy, fully integrated human being" (xxviii). Through numerous personal, historical and situational examples, Bennis demonstrates how leadership can become a personal lifelong habit.

Each month in this column we feature a classic management title, some library-related and some not. Do you have a favorite classic management or leadership book, article or website? We invite you to share a title, with a brief description, to be featured in this column (see the Volume 28, No. 1 issue at <http://journals.tdl.org/llm/index.php/llm/article/view/7047> for some examples). Please contact *New and Noteworthy* columnist Jennifer Bartlett at [jen.bartlett@uky.edu](mailto:jen.bartlett@uky.edu) with your ideas!

**Jennifer Bartlett** ([jen.bartlett@uky.edu](mailto:jen.bartlett@uky.edu)) is Head of Reference Services at the University of Kentucky Libraries.

---

## References

<sup>1</sup> Schein, Edgar H. (Winter 1984). Coming to a New Awareness of Organizational Culture, *Sloan Management Review* 25.2: 3.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Mott Linn's interesting (although now somewhat dated) 2008 literature review, "Organizational Culture: An Important Factor to Consider" (*Bottom Line: Managing Library Finances*, 21(3), 88-93). Of particular interest is Linn's useful discussion of the difficulty of defining and identifying an institution's culture, and finding the monetary value of that culture through financial models such as the Balanced Scorecard and Responsibility Centered Budgeting.

<sup>3</sup> Schein, Edgar H. (2010). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>4</sup> Martin, Jason (2012). "That's How We Do Things Around Here": Organizational Culture (and Change) in Libraries. *In the Library With the Lead Pipe*, 1-6. Retrieved 15 April 2014 from

---

<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2012/thats-how-we-do-things-around-here/>. See also Martin's related 2012 article, "Symbols, Sagas, Rites, and Rituals" in *College & Research Libraries News* 73.6: 348-349.

<sup>5</sup> Blessinger, Kelly, and Paul L. Hrycaj. (2013). *Workplace culture in academic libraries: the early 21st century*. Oxford: Chandos.

<sup>6</sup> Robert F. Moran, Jr. (Winter 2009). "What a Great Place to Work," *Library Leadership and Management* 23.1: 47-49.

<sup>7</sup> Walker, Stephanie (2011). "Determining and Navigating Institutional Culture," *The Bottom Line: Managing Library Finances* 24.2: 113-117.

<sup>8</sup> Meredith Farkas offers further suggestions on how to deal with IT-related problems in a 2010 *American Libraries* column. Discussing why some new services fail, Farkas says, "I always ask people why they think the initiative didn't work at their library and their answer has always been about the culture—whether it was because of controlling IT staff, managers who wouldn't give staff time to experiment with new technologies, or administrators who were deathly risk-averse." See Farkas, Meredith. (2010). "TECHNOLOGY: In Practice. Nurturing Innovation: Tips for managers and administrators." *American Libraries* 41.10: 36.

<sup>9</sup> Shepstone, C., & Currie, L. (2008). Transforming the Academic Library: Creating an Organizational Culture that Fosters Staff Success. *Journal Of Academic Librarianship*, 34(4), 358-368.

<sup>10</sup> Cameron, Kim S. and Quinn, Robert E. (2006). *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture: Based on the Competing Values Framework*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>11</sup> For an interesting discussion of resistance to change in libraries, see Moran, J. F. (2010). Change: More Often than Not, We Can't. *Library Leadership & Management*, 24(3), 98-100.

<sup>12</sup> Maloney, K., Antelman, K., Arlitsch, K., & Butler, J. (2010). Future Leaders' Views on Organizational Culture. *College & Research Libraries*, 71(4), 322-345.

<sup>13</sup> Schachter, D. (2005). The Importance of Understanding Organizational Culture. *Information Outlook*, 9(6), 18-19.