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The Challenges of Managing a Contemporary University Library

Abstract

The paper looks at the leadership/management structure in a typical Ghanaian public university library, and discusses the vital role the various levels of management in the library can play in the efficient management and administration of the library. Challenges found to be facing managers and administrators of contemporary university libraries in Ghana include: a dynamic library governing body; visionary library manager/administrator; responsible and committed supervisors. The paper highlights a number of recommendations to address these challenges.

Introduction

Contemporary public university libraries including the University of Ghana library, like their counterparts in the private sector, are under increasing pressure to achieve performance in cost-effective manner. The pressure for efficient management of these libraries requires quality leadership to steer the affairs of the libraries to achieve good results, a leadership that will stimulate high performance in the library staff in the discharge of their duties. Public university libraries in Ghana would continue to undergo rapid change in the years ahead. Although the missions of these libraries have not changed, the way the mission is achieved are changing dramatically, thus calling for dynamic and visionary leadership in these libraries [Riggs, 2001]. The contemporary library leadership is being challenged to find solutions to all kinds of problems and provide, in spite of numerous constraints, a kind of library service that will fulfill many of the objectives for which the library was established [Tawete, 1988]

The Management Structure of the University of Ghana Library

The management structure of the University of Ghana Library consists of a Library Board as the highest governing body, the University librarian, a Deputy Librarian and a number of Assistant Librarians as supervisors. In their bid to effectively and efficiently manage the library, the various levels of managers encounter a number of challenges.

The Library Board

At the University of Ghana, the highest governing body of the library is the Library Board. The Board is made up of the Pro-Vice Chancellor of the university as the chairman, Deans of all the faculties, two student representatives, the University Librarian and an Assistant Registrar who acts as secretary to the board. The Board is both a governing and advisory and is positioned at the top of the library's organization structure. The board is authorized both to formulate and recommend policy related to the library, and also to advise the University Librarian on the implementation of university policies and generally on library operations.

The Board has traditions that were established as far back as when the university itself was established. For instance, all the Board members are ex-officio, rather than appointed on the basis of unique background, a situation which sometimes affect the relevance and quality of the Board's recommendations. To make the Board more proficient in contemporary management skills and to act as real managers and directors, some of the members should be chosen in part because of their skills in personnel, finance, and program leadership since the Board is likely to pore over financial statements, staffing patterns and maintenance reports [Carver, 1990]. The Library board should also consider

sponsoring members to conferences and workshops on corporate governance as a way of introducing them, especially new members to contemporary thinking about how boards should function.

The University Librarian

At the University of Ghana, the University Librarian is the chief executive officer of the library and is responsible for providing leadership and determining policy for its general management in consultation with his deputy. He implements the decisions of the Library Board of which he is a member. He ensures that the library is conducted in accordance with the approved rules and regulations. He is assisted by a Deputy and a number of Assistant Librarians as supervisors and managers of the library.

For a contemporary University Librarian to succeed, he should have and implement a cohesive internal strategic service vision. A vision that sets forth basic values in which the library is built; embodied in a service concept, operating strategy and service delivery system [Heskett, 1990].

A contemporary University Librarian, like all leaders is expected to have a sense of direction and concern for the future of the library. This expectation directly corresponds to the ability to envision the future. Being forward-looking is the ability to set or select a desirable destination toward which the library should head. This will enable the University Librarian to know what the library will look like, feel like, and be like when it arrives at its goals within the plan period.

The University of Ghana library, like most universities libraries is run on limited budgets and constrained resources. In the face of all the constraints, the University Librarian as director and manager needs added qualities to be able to effectively market the library services and justify continued support and funding to the library. He also needs skills that would enable him create a satisfying environment where his supervisors can work as a team in moving the library into the future. The library supervisors, like all other people would like to work for inspirational leaders who can motivate them toward more and better work. [Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999].

The competence of a University Librarian does not necessarily refer to his abilities in the core technology of the library operation like cataloguing and reference work. The University Librarian is also expected to demonstrate abilities in strategic planning and policy making.

The Need for Managerial Excellence and High Performance

The university library like all other organizations continues to undergo rapid change. A University Librarian as a directors and manager of a library will have to learn how to lead change and to live positively with more ambiguities. Though the mission of the university library may remain the same, the way the mission is achieved are changing. Contemporary university libraries therefore require dynamic leadership who are prepared to break away from established structures and to adjust to the constantly changing environment in order to perform at their maximum level in promoting successful change [Riggs, 2001]

Wholey and Abraham [1985], maintain that for managers of public organizations at all levels to solve complex problems within tight financial constraints, these managers will need to perform four key leadership functions:

1. Define expected organizational and program performance and establish clear, outcome-oriented objectives for their organizations and program;
2. Assess organizational performance and variations in performance terms of specific performance expectations;
3. Stimulate improvements in organizational and program performance or maintain high levels of performance;
4. Communicate credibly the value of the organization's activities within and outside the organization.

A University Librarian must therefore be very proactive in clearly establishing and communicating his objectives and stimulate his team of supervisors towards high levels of performance. A University Librarian must also be assertive and skillful in lobbying for his resource allocation. In lobbying to secure needed resource allocation, the University Librarian has to do more in communicating the value of the library and its activities and informing all the stakeholders about the worth of the library. Communicating the value of the library's activities to all stakeholders can be a tangible way to make the entire university members aware of the library's contributions to the university's program's success. It is also a way of renewing the library's spirit [Wholey and Abraham, 1986]

Managerial Responsibilities of Library Supervisors

In the day-to-day administration of the library, the University Librarian is assisted by a number of professional/academic librarians as supervisors. These supervisors have responsibility, first and foremost to higher management -The University Librarian and/or the Library Board. The supervisors must above all, dedicate themselves to the goals and policies of not only the library, but to the parent organization-the university within which they find themselves. These goals, plans and policies are typically laid down by higher management in a form of statutes or handbook. In fact, it is the primary task of every supervisor in the university to serve as a "linking pin" for management to make sure that these are carried out by the staff/subordinates they supervise.

The library supervisors also have responsibility to staff/subordinates. The staff/subordinates expect their supervisors to provide direction and training, and to protect them from unfair treatment. The library staff values and expectations are changing and continue to vex the library supervisor. The library staffs are no more content with their salaries since they cannot survive on it in the face of present harsh economic conditions. Educational levels are increasing and the types of job positions that library staff want and hold are being upgraded considerably. For instance, previously, immediately after obtaining a first degree the library assistant was placed at Principal Library Assistant. Currently a first degree holder is placed at Senior Library Assistant, a grade lower than previously.

Many library staff are no more finding personal satisfaction in their jobs .Many messengers /cleaners and other junior staff in the library are finding their work boring, and personally unrewarding [Cooper, 1979]. All this undoubtedly have adverse change in the attitudes and behavior of the library staff. The library staffs like all contemporary employees are becoming increasingly enlightened and aware of their legal rights in the library. Backed by their labour union, the Teachers and Educational Workers Union (TEWU), the library staff are demanding greater voice or influence in the kinds of decisions and policies that are made concerning their welfare, including their performance appraisal and promotions.

The library supervisor is therefore expected to be flexible in his own attitudes and responses toward the staff behaviour. Yet at the same time the supervisor is expected to obtain better productivity from the staff in terms of quality service delivery. The supervisors also have responsibility to colleague supervisors. Teamwork and cooperation is essential among the supervisory ranks. There is always a great deal of departmental interdependence. This means that the goals and activities of one department must harmonize with those of others. In this regard, one department may have to sacrifice immediate target for the greater good of the entire library,

The Challenge of Academic Status for Library Supervisors

The demand of academic status has put a lot of pressure on university library supervisors. Combining professional work with academic research work can be very demanding. Years back when times were stable and secure, these supervisors were not severely tested. A lot of them got easily promoted, and achieved fame and fortune. But certainty and routine breed complacency. When times are calm, an individual may not take the opportunity to burrow inside and discover the true gifts buried down deep [Kouzes and Posner, 1995].

Library supervisors are now being called upon to combine their professional role with academic research work, and to publish scholarly articles in referred journals, as a principal condition for promotion. Several university library supervisors have found this condition as being too demanding. The consequence is that a number of these supervisors have been plateaued in their library careers. Some supervisors have remained on their grades for over ten years without promotion. This obviously can be a source of dissatisfaction to the affected supervisors and will adversely affect their job commitment and work output. The University Librarian has a responsibility when his supervisors and officers are plateaued, feel stuck and stressed by the high demand of academic status. The University Librarian should be able to offer support and mobilize the actions of these supervisors and officers in the face of such feelings and help them appreciate that “change does not destroy opportunities; it relocates them”[Bridges,1993].

Style of Management and Cooperation

A contemporary University Librarian should recognize that grand dreams do not become significant realities through his single actions. Managing a university library is a team effort. Teamwork, trust and empowerment are essential elements of a University Librarian's efforts, thus permitting passage of new ideas, especially from supervisors and officers and other stakeholders into the library system. Contemporary university library directors and managers need to be receptive and expose themselves to broader views, and accept ideas from sources even outside the library.

Managing for Improved Quality Service Delivery

The operations of a university library include: acquisitions of relevant reading material; cataloguing or processing of the acquired material; organizing the material in an efficient form for use by readers and assisting readers in relevant literature search (reference work). Readers' perception of what they receive in the library service is based on results obtained and the manner in which the results are achieved. Results and the process by which they are delivered are the components of what is called service quality [Heskett, 1990]. Results and process, and thus quality, are evaluated by the library user in terms of what he/she actually receives in relation to what he/she expected. Library users first expect intelligent and express response to their queries. They have been conditioned to believe that the library has all the answers to their queries. The reader's expectation of the library may or may not take into account the impact of budget cuts and downsizing to the library which obviously affects quality service delivery.

Contemporary library directors and managers therefore have the duty of lobbying the authorities for investments in higher service reliability in the form of selection and training of staff, acquisition of modern and superior technology or other elements of the service delivery, and a single-minded emphasis on user satisfaction, among others [Wyckoff,1984]. Contemporary university library directors and managers need to marshal the basic resources in the delivery of high-quality services including facility logistics, technology and people. Facility logistics in the library include appropriate work tables and storage racks, bigger alcove for receiving and keeping readers' bags, wheel trolleys for conveying books from one end of the library to another, and cleaning equipment.

Technology is another resource that should be marshaled in search of quality in library services. The importance of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in quality service cannot be overemphasized. University library directors and managers should endeavour to acquire modern computers and automate the entire library operations like cataloguing, reference work and reader services including charging and discharging, and processing of overdue material. The library should have network communication facilities for officers and staff to communicate swiftly and share ideas, in service delivery. All this will leverage the expertise of the library staff who will be free from manual and tedious work of cataloguing books, as well as doing literature search. It will also empower the library staff to deliver superior service to sometimes astounded and often very satisfied library users.

Yet another resource, perhaps the most vital resource is the personnel in the library. In the library, just like most service delivery organizations, the personnel are the largest dominant quality resource. Reich (1985) holds the view that, the most effective avenue to improved service quality is through increased supervision; greater expenditures for training of staff; greater exercise of judgment by staff and more empowerment for front-line servers. Wyckoff (1984) calls this form of empowerment “informating”. It is the process through which service providers are supplied both with superior information and ways of retrieving it, combining it, and otherwise using it intuitively to solve customers’ problems in ways that are both effective and personal.

In the face of shortage of staff in the public university libraries resulting from the government’s policy on downsizing of public organizations, university library directors and managers have the task of “cross-training of the existing staff” [Levitt, 1976]. This will not only allow the library to staff multiple activities with fewer staff, it will also afford an opportunity for the development of the staff themselves through job expansion.

Evaluation of Service Delivery

An integral part of every effective managerial and supervisory process is evaluation. Evaluation involves comparing a program or service accomplishments with criteria and standards set for. An evaluation of the library service does not necessarily have to be conducted by an external expert. Evaluation of the library service should be an ongoing one, a kind of self-assessment process, fully participated and shared by the entire staff providing the library service, as well as other stakeholders of the library service like the library users and the authorities who provide the purse and funding for the running of the library service. Such evaluation, when effectively conducted would permit the entire staff of the library to know and appreciate the effect of the library’s operation on the university, and whether the service is achieving desired results.

Conclusion

The bad news about public university libraries is that they continue to experience cuts in budgets and other resource allocation. The good news, however, is that the bad news need not be a permanent obstacle, and that a visionary and skillful library director and manager can transform the few resources available to the satisfaction of library users and the community they serve. The survival of contemporary public university libraries therefore depend to a large extent on how well they are managed. The professionals and managers working in these libraries must not only be prepared to accept increased responsibilities, but must also be prepared to execute those responsibilities effectively and efficiently.

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