

Conflict in Libraries

Intergroup conflict in libraries is explored, including conflict between departments, between professionals and bureaucracy, and between older and newer staff members. Other special interests such as informal power-holders and the subprofessional are identified. This analysis shows that existing organizational relationships in libraries let "means" become "ends." Strong forces toward conformity hamper desirable growth and change. A restructuring of libraries is proposed along the lines of professional rather than semiprofessional organizations. Principal changes to be made are in existing processing-service relationships and administrative-professional relationships.

THE PROBLEM

CONFLICT IS A FACT of existence. It exists whenever and wherever people come together to work. Some types of conflict encourage strong vitality and exert the right kinds of pressures to meet the objectives of an organization. Other kinds of conflict, however, work in reverse. They act to sap the energy of an organization, to subvert its goals—and can even endanger its existence.

Conflict has been given major attention in management literature, but it has been largely neglected in the literature of library administration. This article is devoted to the analysis of conflict in the library situation with particular attention focused on its undesirable aspects. While practical solutions are proposed, its chief purpose is to develop understanding of the causes and consequences of conflict in libraries.

Librarians frequently attribute conflict to "problem" staff, yet individuals can leave the library and the conflicts persist. All libraries are likely to have similar conflicts for they are often caused by common organizational forces in the

library environment. Chief among them is departmentalization and hierarchial organization. Groups other than formal organizational groups also conflict with each other. Older and newer staff members typically disagree on important questions. Since conflict has organizational causes, it can—and indeed it must—be dealt with on an organizational basis.

This paper undertakes to deal with a complex and highly volatile subject because of its implications for library development. It draws upon management literature and speaks in management terms. What is truly at stake here, however, is professionalism itself. Librarianship gives major attention to the organization of its physical materials. It must give equal attention to the organization of its human resources, if the reason for material flow—service—is to be realized. This article attempts to explain why service objectives are often subordinated to other considerations.

In the ensuing discussion several organizational concepts are used. Hierarchy or bureaucratic organization refers to the pyramidal structure characterized by the "chain of command" where each person has one person to whom he reports who in turn reports to someone higher in the hierarchy. Professional or-

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ganizations are discussed and a distinction made between professional and semiprofessional organizations.

Organization, as it is used here, refers both to the formal organization and to informal aspects of organization, those outside the formal structure. One way to examine informal groupings is in terms of interest groups, that is, of people who have common goals and act together at least part of the time to achieve these goals. The informal organization also includes people who hold "power"; these are, by definition, people in the organization who decide what goes on. As will be developed, power is only partly a function of authority granted by the administrative organization. Professionalism is considered here in terms of what constitutes professional behavior in the various organizational relationships of librarians.

TECHNICAL SERVICES VS. PUBLIC SERVICES

Dividing into departments achieves the important advantage of specialization, but departmentalization also immediately establishes the conditions of conflict. The various departments must compete with each other for a share of limited resources. Since their work is interrelated in many ways, the success of one is partly dependent on the success of another. Each department develops its own specific goals which may conflict with those of other departments.¹

Every department in a library can conflict with every other, but the most serious and also the major divisional conflict in libraries is usually between technical services and public services. For processing units the goal becomes one of efficiency—the greatest output in least time. Of equal, if not greater, importance to them is the maintenance of their sys-

tems and procedures. These goals can and do conflict with public services' goals to serve the user.

Since processing departments are perennially behind, the priorities they assign to processing materials influences the degree of public service possible. Few processing departments have an organized plan for processing in an order based on user needs. They may "rush" specific requests, although they often do so reluctantly. Important new statistical sources essential to reference service, for example, may be lost for days as they wend their way through processing with other less urgently needed materials.

Improving the speed of processing would alleviate this problem. But the order of processing materials is only one aspect of the conflict. In making decisions relevant to the degree and type of cataloging to be given materials, efficiency considerations and conformity to existing practices can also be in opposition to service needs. These aspects may have more long-term effects if only because it is more difficult to detect when service requirements are not being met.

One reason for processing policies and procedures not being geared to service needs is that processing units are frequently isolated from the first-hand experience with users and their needs for materials. Generally libraries have not been successful in devising organized ways to feed back to technical services information on the success of their operation. Technical services tend to let their systems and procedures become ends in themselves. Public services departments can try individually and on a departmental basis to get changes or decisions which will improve service, but—and this is the crux of the matter—they will not always be successful because technical services have an equal position in the line operations of the library. Therefore, service needs cannot automatically win.

¹For a discussion of intergroup conflict see: J. G. March and H. A. Simon, *Organizations* (New York: Wiley, 1963), p. 121.

Library goals are, under such circumstances, subordinated to a means operation in the library.

It can be disputed whether cataloging is a goal or a means toward goals, but the intellectual or professional character of the operation cannot be disputed. Within technical services departments, however organized, cataloging too must deal with pressures of physical processing activities which can be in opposition to professional standards of excellence. Certainly in the medium-sized operation catalogers are sometimes forced to give major attention to processing problems at the expense of time they would normally give to cataloging questions and problems. The professional services in libraries are, under such circumstances, and by the way work is arranged, forced to take second place to the operations which should in effect serve them.

HIERARCHY

Library schools, teaching in the classical administration tradition, have taught librarians the advantage of bureaucratic organization. This type of organization does achieve important advantages in locating responsibility, directing communications, and assuring coordination. But bureaucracy also has limitations inherent in it.

By its nature, advancement in hierarchical systems depends on pleasing superiors. "What the boss wants" enters into the decisions of subordinates. There is a distinct tendency for people not to communicate events or information which may reflect poorly upon them. Personal motives inevitably enter into relations with superiors. Indeed, this facet is built into the hierarchical structure which dispenses rewards as a way to win loyalty and ensure compliance. There are times, of course, when doing what the boss wants is not in the best interest of the library.

There is conflict in any bureaucracy which employs specialists.² Some decisions can only be made by people with a particular expertise. Yet the specialist who has the knowledge to make the decision may not occupy the position in the hierarchy assigned for this decision. This is particularly true as organizations get more specialized. No administrator can have the knowledge required to handle all the complex technical matters which come to him because policy, change, or money is involved. Administrators may call on individuals or on groups for advice, reserving the final decision for themselves, but if they habitually follow this advice, their decision-making power in effect is going into the hands of the specialist.

One reason heads of organizations resist this is that the specialist sometimes makes his decisions on a different basis from that used by the administrator. He uses technical criteria and may or may not have the immediate organizational objectives in mind in making his decisions. This conflict may be seen operating with scientists employed in government and industry.

Many library administrators think they allow for full exploration of a topic by professional staff, but the impact of status is nevertheless present. This may be observed in a library staff meeting. Junior members hesitate to express their opinions frankly in the presence of their department heads. However much administrators like to think their meetings are democratic, the decision-making actually rests on how supervisors feel and not upon the consensus of the professional staff.

Because of these limitations, professional organizations take over certain areas of decision-making. A professional

² For one presentation of this conflict see: V. A. Thompson, "Hierarchy, Specialization and Organizational Conflict," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, V (March 1961), 485-521.

organization is one in which what the majority of the professionals do is the major goal of the organization. In these organizations, typically, the professional group through full group participation and through their representation on committees takes over the decisions relating to the goals of the organization. The administration concerns itself with means decisions and activities (those involving economy and efficiency and auxiliary services not central to the enterprise, such as business affairs). An administrative hierarchy still exists, but there is actually a sharing of power between the professional group and the administration.

It is important that this division of authority be achieved. Since professional organizations are non-profit in nature, there is no test of success in the competitive market place. Their activities are difficult to measure. Control groups naturally seek to keep costs down. Since need cannot be proved, it is important to have a professional group insisting on standards as a counterpressure to pressures for economy.

Library administrators, coming from the ranks of the professional, should also be expected to fight for standards, and they do. But they are directly susceptible to external pressures. Their job depends on getting along with control groups. They need a strong counterforce from the professionals. Too, the administrator is fundamentally loyal first to the administration for whom he works. The professional's major commitment is to his clientele and to his internalized set of professional standards and ethics.

Most libraries probably fall into the classification of semiprofessional organizations. A semiprofessional organization is characterized by the fact that its professional group has *not* achieved control in matters relating to goals and standards. Means or economic considerations characteristically dominate goals considerations. Ways and means become

ends in themselves. Substantive questions having to do with the intellectual side of the enterprise are either ignored or downgraded by leaving them to staff down the line who do not have the authority to make decisions and carry them out. Consider again the library staff meetings in which ways and means and routine matters dominate discussions. Few academic library staffs engage in defining service goals and in working out plans to achieve them.

Hierarchy and change. Another aspect of hierarchy which acts against professional goals has been implied. People in hierarchies tend to act to protect their position or status. When a change is proposed they examine and act on it in terms of how it will affect their status. This means that new ideas and proposals do not get the free and critical appraisal they require. Rather, people in hierarchies tend to be strongly committed to the status quo. Innovation frequently can be made only after long struggle or not at all. The absence of conflict in the face of social conditions requiring internal change becomes dangerous.³ Professionals can also resist change for the same reasons or because they fear they cannot perform in new ways. Management can be also effectively stymied by a staff unreceptive to change.

Why do librarians not demand greater voice in library affairs? One reason is that they have not diagnosed the problem in these terms. Another is that librarians are more "employee" than "professionally" oriented, feeling their obligation is to "go along." They have no strong commitment to their clientele or to stan-

³ Presthus deals with this aspect in a more general social context. Organizations tend to stress conformity rather than difference. In the face of social and technological pressures for change they frequently respond with inflexibility. Yet, survival depends on critical inquiry into patterns of organization, thought, and behavior. With critical inquiry, the quality of decision is sharpened. Without it, decision-making rests dangerously on tradition and on status. R. Presthus, *The Organizational Society* (New York: Knopf, 1962), p. 287-94.

dards. These obligations are normally the basic loyalty of a professional group and constitute the reason the professional, either individually or in groups, takes action and assumes power over certain types of organizational decisions.⁴ If the professional person in a professional organization does not see the need and assume these responsibilities, all other arguments for his professional status become academic.

SPECIAL INTERESTS

There are other special interest groups in the library which are in conflict with the formal administration or with other groups in the library. One of these groups is the "old community."

The old community. The old community consists of people who have been on the library staff many years. They may have long-standing differences with each other, but they are held together on important issues by a common commitment to the status quo. There are many good reasons for this. To a new person change is an opportunity to show his worth. An older staff member may feel that changes casts a bad reflection on him, that advocacy of change shows a lack of appreciation for the accomplishments of the past. The newcomer brings outside experience and a fresh viewpoint to a situation. The older staff member is more likely to be settled in his notions. Past disappointments may have caused him to lower the level of his aspirations. The older staff member in most libraries is likely to be conservative in his outlook, to see the library as a passive rather than an active service. He simply will not

see the need for, nor the appropriateness of, certain kinds of innovations.

Conflict between older and newer staff members in libraries is common and has varying consequences, depending on a number of factors, but if the majority of the staff are older members it is likely that they will successfully resist efforts of newer staff. All change is not necessarily good and all new staff members are not change agents, but change is normally introduced through new staff; often they are hired for this specific purpose. Administrative approval, however, cannot wholly gainsay the conservative and uncooperative attitude of a staff. It can form an effective force against desirable change in libraries.

Informal power. All power, of course, is not in the formal organization. There are people whose position does not account for the amount of influence they have in library matters. People can hold power for several reasons. Some people get power simply because they have been around a long time. Much of what goes on in organizations is not written down. People who hold information about the organization's business wield power in the way they provide or withhold it. Another type of power enjoyed in libraries is that of the group which has the special confidence of the head librarian. These are the people upon whom he relies and to whom he turns for advice. The "in-group" need not be those who report immediately to him. It is more likely to be the people with whom he habitually shares his lunch or breaktime. Libraries also have natural leaders, people who have won the respect and confidence of the staff. Since they speak for the staff, management must take their point of view into account in decision making.

It is not necessary to attempt to probe further into the complex topic of power relations in organizations, but it should be emphasized that individuals and

⁴ Etzioni suggests another reason. In his characterization of the semiprofessions, he points out that the majority of their members are women and women may be more submissive to authority. A. Etzioni, *Modern Organizations* (New Jersey: Prentice, 1964), p. 89. We may also find part of the explanation in the relatively passive personality of librarians. See A. L. Brophy and A. M. Gazda, "Handling the Problem Staff Member," *Illinois Libraries*, XLIII (December 1961), 750-63 for an analysis of the personality of librarians.

groups outside the official hierarchy do have power. One result of having power is to seek to hold it. As many new librarians have discovered, what looks like getting a new and minor change actually turns into a power struggle with the "in-group" or with individuals with power who resist the change. Making many library changes depends on whether those furthering them can secure a position of influence or power in the library. It should also be noted that department heads can and do resist efforts for change from upper level administration. A head librarian can be blocked by his subordinates who subtly or directly resist his authority.

This discussion of special interests in libraries would not be complete without including two other groups in libraries which cross formal departmental lines. Neither is relatively powerful; both are likely to be dissatisfied.

The subprofessional. Subprofessional levels were established in libraries for the worthy purpose of relieving professional staff of routine, nonprofessional work. But this class system, nevertheless, creates conflict. No matter how well the subprofessional performs, he can never join the ranks of the professional—and far better paid—class. Further, in many libraries the distinction between what the two groups do is highly arbitrary. A subprofessional can carry a position of nearly equal responsibility at half the pay, as he sees it, only because he has not been to library school. Some professionals achieve much of their professionalism by looking down on the nonprofessional. Under these conditions, whether or not it is openly expressed, the subprofessional is likely to feel considerable resentment. A democratic staff association alleviates but does not solve the problem.

Junior staff. The junior professional staff member has two strikes against him; he is probably relatively new and he has

no organizational status. Further, he is probably kept doing subprofessional work for an excessively long period of time. He is likely to be similarly restricted in his outside professional activities, for library associations are also slow to accept newcomers and are influenced by status in making committee appointments at any very high level. Librarians have been acutely conscious of their lack of status, particularly in the academic community. Yet librarians themselves give their junior entrants into the profession something far less than the colleague relationship they deserve.

OTHER ASPECTS

The individual and the organization. Actually, any individual has a struggle with the organization in which he works. In going to work, he must give up a certain amount of independence. Organizations naturally seek to take as much of his time as possible. He has other group memberships besides the library and is therefore pulled between the various groups for which he has a loyalty and which have a claim on his time and effort.

Some jobs get so monotonous, so devoid of opportunity to use imagination or initiative, that they impair the human beings' growth forces.⁵ In the interest of efficiency libraries have reduced some people to doing jobs which are overwhelmingly monotonous and fatiguing. This is not only true for stack readers. Many professional jobs in libraries, in the interest of "mass production," approach this level. It is important to treat any human being as an individual and to provide him with opportunities for growth, but for librarians to be stymied in this fashion is the antithesis of professionalism.

⁵ Argyris contends there are basic incongruencies between the growth trends of a healthy personality and the requirements of the formal organization. Frustration, conflict, failure, and short term perspective are the resultants. C. Argyris, *Personality and Organization* (New York: Harper, 1957).

Excessive authoritarianism. Under excessive authoritarianism all the weaknesses of bureaucracy are magnified. Orders, threats, and criticisms characterize communications with staff. People are treated like cogs in a machine. Basic feelings and rights of employees are disregarded. This is a sorry state for any library and whatever the outward appearance, fear, interpersonal hostility, and resentment are present. People are forced to act simply to protect themselves. They cannot act freely in the best interest of the library. Indeed, they would be criticized if they did, for compliance and conformity are the essential demands of this type of administration.⁶

The external environment. The impact of pressures from control and support groups to keep costs down has already been noted. The external environment affects the internal library situation in other ways as well. Organizations which occupy positions of low regard and status in their community, which is sometimes true of libraries, can be expected to be less receptive to new ideas, to be less likely to welcome and explore innovations. Being treated like semiprofessionals by their community reinforces their own semiprofessional behavior.

What a professional organization hopes from its community is that it will provide challenges and give it support and encouragement. When the opposite is true, the attitude of the community will complement and give support to the more conservative elements inside. Under such circumstances these conservative elements may be quite accurately reflecting what the community wants in the way of service and expects from its librarians.

The external environment of any library contains some elements which are

sympathetic and concerned with library development. In the academic community, faculty committees can be expected to concern themselves with and support service improvements. These groups are not equally effective and often represent special interests. They can become critical of the way the library operates.

Any organization should arrange to be influenced by its environment in the form of planned-for data about the community and about its effectiveness and satisfaction with its services. Yet most libraries have little more than a highly impressionistic, individual, and probably distorted idea of how satisfied their community is with their services. This failure adequately to take the community into account in internal decision-making defeats service objectives and can be politically dangerous. As has been indicated, the failure of librarians to build strong professional-clientele relationships and give first loyalty to that clientele is a major reason for their not being pressed sufficiently for service improvements.

An examination of internal conflict in libraries therefore identifies the groups and interests whose attitudes and activities decide whether or not a library gives good service. Processing-service relationships and administrative-professional relationships, as they now exist in many libraries, let "means" become "ends." In the absence of a strong professional voice, economy considerations lower service standards. Intellectual aspects are downgraded. Formal and informal organizational elements conspire to defeat proposals for change and growth. The basis for much decision-making in libraries is personal or is power motivated, in opposition to the best interest of the library. This is not the organizational setting for maintaining a high level of professional service. It can perhaps only be changed signifi-

⁶ In a "before and after" study, Guest explores staff feelings and attitudes under an authoritarian regime. R. H. Guest, *Organizational Change: The Effect of Successful Leadership* (Homewood, Ill.: Irwin, 1962).

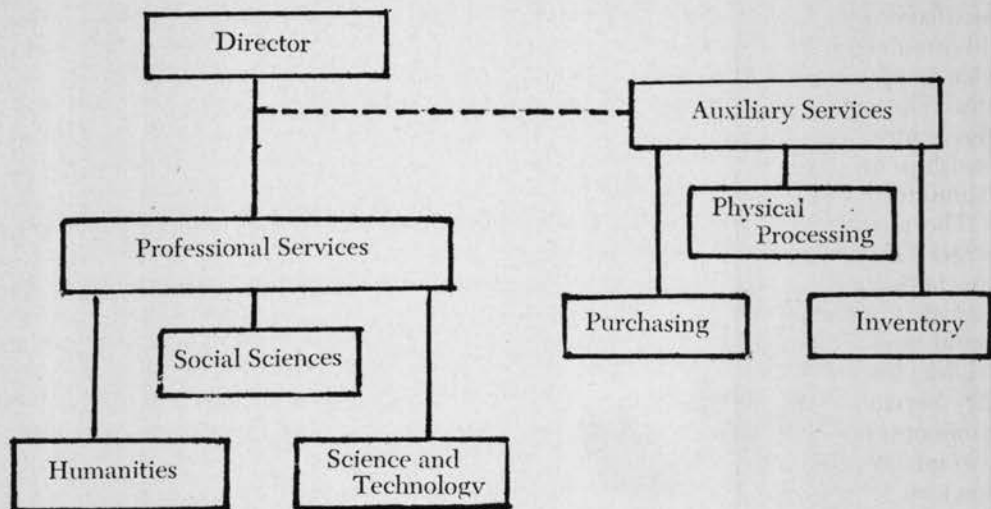


FIGURE 1.

cantly by changing the ways of organizing work into divisions and by changing the way power is distributed in libraries.

SOLUTIONS

One organizational structure that might contribute to the accomplishment of these changes is modeled after and closely parallels that of institutions of higher education. Libraries could be restructured to group professional activities together and then organizationally designate them as the central activity of the organization. This could be done by assigning other activities to a staff or service relationship to them, as shown in Figure 1.

Within the subject divisions, the professional activities of selection, indexing (cataloging), reference, and readers advisory service would be performed. As a library grows, these divisions would have one head occupying much the same position as an academic vice president holds in a university. Under these broad subject divisions, various subunits or further specialization of effort could develop. Units might be further subdivided

by subject—chemistry, etc. (Departmental libraries would fall within the jurisdiction of the appropriate division.) Or, some staff might spend full time on indexing materials; others operate primarily in readers service. Departments would be run on the relatively democratic basis of teaching departments in a university where, regardless of rank, every faculty member has an equal voice and an equal vote.⁷

A second informal framework should also be established. Permanent professional committees crossing departments, such as indexing committees and selection committees, would function. These committees would concern themselves with common problems and with areas where common policies are desirable. The decisions made by these groups would be more or less binding on the organization. Professional staff would also be represented by advisory committees to the head librarian to advise from the professional point of view on such aspects as personnel policies. Similarly,

⁷ See J. D. Millett, *The Academic Community* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), for an exploration of the academic organizational structure.

auxiliary units would have professional advisory committees concerned with service implications of their various activities. The auxiliary units would bear to the central departments the same relationship as business offices do to academic teaching departments.

The auxiliary units, as libraries grow larger, could encompass a variety of specialties such as data processing personnel. Competent nonprofessionals could find here a career advancement ladder, for the upper positions in auxiliary services would carry high salaries commensurate with responsibility for important, complex, but not professional services.

These changes could not be "paper" changes only. They would have to involve an actual relinquishing of authority by administrators and an acceptance of responsibility on the part of professional staff. Further, they would mean a major redirection of professional effort away from the routines of library operation. Administrators would lose a measure of control but in the process would achieve their ultimate goals. The quality of administrative leadership would be a critical factor in whether or not libraries succeeded in becoming first-class professional organizations.

New relationships among groups would have to be worked out. Libraries would have to find new ways to resolve conflict between divergent points of view under this more democratic form of administration. Building the relationship of auxiliary services with professional services would be a major task. The respective decision-making prerogatives of administrators and professional staff can only be partially distinguished. Their interrelationship in achieving goals is critical and would involve continued negotiations and compromise. Service standards would have to bend—but not bow—to economic realities. Systems and procedures would be modified in terms of

user needs, but they would not be abandoned before user demands on the system.

In such a structure as is here described there would be more conflict in the sense of questioning, intensive scrutiny, and the consideration of a wider range of alternative courses of action. Where a library staff is largely conservative, however, this viewpoint can still prevail. Informal power will still exist, although the basis for it may change somewhat. Certainly, staff who have the respect and trust of their colleagues will formally and informally have much to say about what goes on.

What would be accomplished is that powerful growth forces would be released to offset the restrictive forces described earlier. We would have made clear to ourselves and eventually to our users what constitutes the nature of the library enterprise. Libraries would be expected to refocus their endeavor on their service character. Staff time would have been released to serve clientele. By limiting the range of subject areas with which they dealt, professionals could develop the competency to conduct clientele relationships at a truly professional level. On a group basis, professional staff could concern itself with, and engage in, defining purposes and developing programs to achieve these purposes. Out of discussion and deliberation should come a commitment on the part of all members to make them work. These goals would also form the basis for resolving conflict in the best interest of the library. A climate for decision-making could grow which values critical inquiry more highly than present structures. Individual ambition could be better harnessed to the improvement of the library. With these orientations, libraries might be expected to realize a potential of service and of support for that service far beyond any that has been previously known.

Certainly many libraries have made

advances in these directions. Many already divide by some subject arrangement, although the majority still keep technical services in the line operation, and cataloging functions within this unit. Many public libraries have largely resolved this aspect of the problem by removing their processing from the immediate library to a central processing center. Many libraries, particularly medium-sized libraries, enjoy a high degree of democracy in working out their affairs, but most have been attempting to cope with organizational forces which inhibited and hampered them. The central issue is not democracy versus bureaucracy; it is whether or not librarians are prepared to assume responsibilities and arrange their organizational life to per-

mit the performance of a service which can be labeled professional.

What is the alternative? In all but backwash situations, libraries of every size are going to be pressed for increased service. Under the conditions described earlier, libraries will respond with rigidity. This will intensify the criticism of control and clientele groups and create internal working conditions even less tolerable than those now existing. Eventually, the entire library enterprise could be placed in jeopardy. In the face of present and future demands on libraries, a fundamental reassessment and realignment of existing organizational relationships in libraries would appear imperative.

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