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J. Stephen Town

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Evidence based organizational change: people surveys, strategies and structures

J. Stephen Town
University of York, York, UK

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present a case study of the use of people surveys to enact change in human capital organization and practices in a University library.

Design/methodology/approach – The study covers seven years of people surveys and the consequent interventions applied based on this and other data and evidence at the University of York, UK. The case describes measurement of staff's lived experience, leading to innovation and intervention in management strategies, structures and policies. The research employs a mixed methodology; the paper draws on quantitative evidence from surveys, qualitative evidence from focus groups and desk research on human capital measurement and emotion in the workplace.

Findings – The paper describes the findings of investigations across seven years, discusses the available methods for people assessment, and the different theoretical foundations of the engagement, climate and excellence surveys used across the period. Strategic and structural interventions are described and their effectiveness discussed.

Research limitations/implications – The limitations of research in the field of human capital are discussed, including the participant observation of the library director, together with the potential confounding factors affecting data collected during the period of research.

Social implications – The paper reflects on advances in the understanding and practice of people evaluation in libraries. The development of a people strategy based on evidence, and repetition of surveys to gauge the effectiveness of interventions, with consequent refinement of solutions, appear to have had a real effect on the lived experience, culture and service provided by the case library.

Originality/value – The originality and value of the paper is that it provides a unique long-term case study of people surveys, strategy and structure in an academic research library.

Keywords Library management, Human relations, ClimateQUAL, Library strategy, Library structures, Staff surveys

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Libraries have a strong track record of measuring performance and using data and evidence to improve their services. Despite the fact that around half of an academic library's budget is spent on staff, measurement effort has not extended as strongly into this area of investment (Town, 2014). The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the collision of people, strategy, structure and culture in an academic research library across a seven year period of investigation, intervention and interruption.



Thanks to Ian Hall, Jo Black, Katie Burn, and Karen Smith, and to all Information staff at York for providing the opinions on which this paper is based. Thanks to the Association of Research Libraries, Capita, Elementa Leadership and ORC International, for their roles in collecting and analysing the raw data.

There is a substantial corpus of research and writing on the human dimension of organization, and it is not the intent to review this here. Some of this is often expressed in unreferenced received wisdoms, and a selection of these quotes is offered as a starting point for this consideration, reflecting the issues that this paper seeks to elucidate:

[...] the most valuable resource of any organization is its staff.

Human capital walks out the door each evening.

Culture eats Strategy for Breakfast (attributed to Peter Drucker).

Structure follows strategy (Chandler, 1962).

[...] as the left foot follows the right (Mintzberg, 1990).

Performance depends upon proper organisation (attributed to Peter Drucker).

The behaviour of people in organizations is key (Schein, 2010).

[...] taken for granted behaviours constitute the essence of culture (Schein, 2010).

This paper links people management and evidence about the experience of staff in a case study library. Because the paper is written from a leadership perspective with a command intent to improve the library concerned, this is not a description of an inductive collection of evidence with complete freedom to act on findings. There are conceptual, institutional and political contexts here which affect the collection and application of evidence. The human dimension of a library cannot be cleanly separated and worked on without reference to other factors, in particular the developing aims and strategies of the service and the broader institution.

The approach in the paper is to present chronologically and to reflect on longitudinal changes implied by the different data sets. This is intended to provide a sense of narrative; to tell the story of a library from the people perspective over time. Mengel *et al.*'s (2013) description of working on staff climate as an "odyssey" seems apposite here. This is also the story of a long and diverting journey, but hopefully without the same consequences for the crew as in the original epic.

Research questions and concepts

The research questions for this paper are as follows:

RQ1. Do our staff structure, organization and practice reflect and support our values, or our intended strategy?

RQ2. What is the lived experience of staff?

RQ3. How does this affect strategy and delivery?

There is a question about the correct structure for academic and research libraries at a time of change. New leaders often appear to restructure their libraries (at least at top level) without or before consideration of strategy, which seems contrary to the received wisdom. This was not an approach taken in the case library, and the library at the beginning of the story was mainly traditional in structural form, with some "bolted on" teams reflecting new developments, such as the Digital Library.

Some subsidiary questions about “correct” structure for the current age arise from the broader literature. Three in particular seem relevant to libraries using traditional bureaucratic and hierarchical organizational principles:

- (1) “Adhocracy is the structure of our age” (Mintzberg, 1989). Fluidity and flexibility of staff deployment do not appear to be a strong feature of academic and research library structures.
- (2) “Corporations will come to resemble universities or colleges” (Handy, 2002). The response to this (when Handy made the statement) of “Then God help us all” might still be shared; the lack of management appreciation, and the high complexity and transaction costs of the traditional research university seems a very well-hidden advantage. However, the notion of the value of information, intelligence and ideas seems very relevant to libraries in a university context.
- (3) “The challenge is not so much to build a matrix structure as it is to create a matrix in the minds of our managers” (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1990). Silo mentality and its consequences were strongly apparent in the case library at the beginning of the period, and this would seem to be a general feature of the structure of many academic libraries above a certain scale. A lack of flexible perspectives and relationships, resulting in poor judgment and an inability to negotiate the trade-offs that might drive libraries towards strategic objectives was certainly apparent in some areas of the case library at the start of this journey.

It is important here to be clear about what this paper does not seek to cover in terms of human capital measurement in libraries. The author’s Value Scorecard (Town and Kyrillidou, 2013) within which a Human Capital Measurement Framework is placed (Town, 2014) provides clarity on the range of important staff measures collected and considered in the case library. This paper does not discuss issues of capacity and its measurement. Staff survey findings did occasionally raise issues of capacity indirectly, but these tended to be expressed in relation to individual workloads rather than overall capacity. Capacity and its measurement will feature in a subsequent paper on the implementation of the Value Scorecard.

“Climate of Affect” measurement (taken to mean how people express how they feel about their work) and a desire for its improvement is at the heart of this paper. Emotion in work, and opinion about the “lived experience” of staff at work in the case library, and the consequences of this for “engagement” are the main subjects here. There are connections between these factors and a positive “Culture of Momentum” and the achievement of strategy, but again this particular aspect will be discussed in the implementation paper. This paper is about the general culture and sub-cultures of the case library, taking culture to encompass the assumptions that people make about the library as a place to work revealed in part through the surveys and studies described.

There is a fundamental assumption about the relationship between staff culture and service excellence that underpins all the investigations described in the paper, but there remain questions about its general validity and the precise causal relationship between happy customers and happy staff, despite this appearing to be a given to many commentators.

Case context

The case library is the Library and Archives at the University of York, UK.

The University of York is a successful research university with a strong teaching quality record, and regularly ranked between 10th and 20th in UK University league tables. In the most recent UK Research Excellence Framework York was placed 14th overall and 10th for impact. Internationally York is ranked around 100 in the world according to Times Higher Education. York celebrated its 50th Anniversary in 2013, and was one of only six universities under 50 in the world to have achieved a top 100 ranking. The University seeks to maintain world-class levels of excellence in all its activities.

Despite being a new University, in common with many 1960s UK foundations, the structures and principles established initially were deliberately traditional, and many academic staff still clearly find this comforting. Throughout the period of study York also maintained a flat structure of around 30 academic departments without aggregation into school or faculty structures.

There was significant University development across the period, doubling the campus footprint, and increasing student numbers by around 50 per cent. University values were consistent and strongly articulated across the period. There was a definite policy to maintain a friendly and cohesive University community with strong student involvement and engagement through the period of expansion, and a desire not to lose the distinctiveness of the York campus experience.

This growth was also reflected in staff numbers in the library. Library and Archives had 133 people in 2008, and by 2015 the converged Information Directorate of Library and Archives and IT Services had 267 people (of which 80 were IT specialist staff). One of the established approaches in the University for some time had been to consider library and computing to be closely related services, with a single common governance link to higher University levels. This was exemplified in the successive “joined up” information strategies formed in 2008 and 2013, and the structural implications of convergence of the two departments are described below. At the outset of the period the Library had also recently physically and organizationally combined with the Borthwick Institute for Archives to create the University Library and Archives, but without any apparent active attempts to homogenize management approaches and sub-cultures below the top level. The archives collection is the largest in the North of England and has public record status.

The most significant change in the UK HE context during the period was the very large increase in student tuition fees, which had some impact on expectations of all university services. During the period of this study the York Library became a member of Research Libraries UK, and the University was also subsequently invited to join the Russell Group of elite UK Universities, reflecting its status as a leading UK research institution.

Confounding factors

There were a number of factors relating to the period, or to the approach to investigations, with likely consequences for the results and findings from staff data:

- Environmental disruption – a major three-year library refurbishment and extension programme. This was highly disruptive to staff working environments including changes of location, and during which rapid decision making around the project curtailed normal consultation and communication.
- Central University Human Resource (HR) programmes, methods and concepts – much of the evidence presented here comes from centrally chosen and imposed surveys, and some actions taken from those surveys and methods

to address perceived issues were developed and led by the central HR department. The Library was not therefore a “thing apart” from the overall institution in its quest for improvement in the staff experience, although each department was expected to develop its own unique action plans and interventions arising from corporate surveys.

- Convergence: the creation of the Information Directorate and closer working with IT services – in 2008/2009 the author was asked to take overall responsibility for both information-related departments. Initially this was not a merger, with both Library and Computing Services maintaining individual department status, but in the context of a joined up strategy and leadership. In 2010/2011 other University changes led to all support departments becoming Directorates, and the Information Directorate was more formally established, involving joining up of administration, front-line services and relationship management activities. This means that the data and evidence described was collected at times from only Library and Archives staff, and at later periods from all Directorate staff.
- 24/7 opening – the extension of library opening times to 24/7/362 in 2012 required an additional staffing contingent costing approximately £0.25 m. This new cadre of staff in relatively large headcount numbers with shift patterns largely separate from daytime staff (and culture) introduces another variable into the trend data.
- Sub-cultures – it is clear from some of the findings presented here (in which such breakdowns were available) that multiple sub-cultures exist across different components of the library structure. This was supported by other analyses in the case library using the competing values concept (Cameron *et al.*, 2006). This means that the overall data may be homogenised to a misleading extent, and consequently interventions may be poorly targeted. The lack of availability of raw statistical data from commercial surveys is also a concerning issue, limiting information on validity, reliability and standard deviations.

It is hard to see in a real-world case within a changing context how such confounding factors affecting the data can be avoided. The approach here is to ensure that interpretation of the data takes these factors into account appropriately.

Limitations

The limitations of this research are inherent in the methods used to obtain the evidence. As mentioned above, the lack of access to the full data, analytic tools, or the algorithms applied to develop particular scores severely limits the ability to squeeze the full meaning from the data collected through commercial suppliers. This also inhibits effective data sharing and learning across the organization and beyond from potential benchmarking partners in other institutions.

There are multiple conceptual bases for the instruments and methods used in this research, and the paper elaborates these where relevant. People at work measurement appears to be an area in which there is no paradigmatic agreement about the best conceptual framework to apply. Objectivity may also be a vain hope in the field of human capital measurement.

An academic library is as much a broad social construction as a discreet departmental unit. Perceptions of identity, belonging and loyalty may not be as clear cut as a diagram of structure might imply, and this may have an impact on the evidence collected.

Finally this paper covers a single case. All libraries and university institutions claim to be unique, inviting a criticism of limited applicability of this learning to other contexts. The author is a participant observer working from a situated leadership perspective representing the hegemonic structure of the institution, with the obvious potential biases that this entails.

Chronology of investigations and interventions

Effective and Sustainable Assessment Programme (ESP, 2008)

As a new Director with a commitment to evidence-based change, and seeking an international perspective on the York Library, the author commissioned the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) to undertake a consultancy within their ESP. In total, 38 North American libraries had been visited between 2005 and 2007, and three libraries outside the continent took part in 2007-2008, of which York was one. The aim of the programme was to help develop a quality culture or “culture of assessment”, whilst recognizing that “Each library has a unique culture and mission”, and “Organizational issues play a significant role in sustainable assessment” (Association of Research Libraries, 2015a).

The methodology was consultant led, with a sustainable assessment week visit taking place between 21 and 29 June 2008, including sessions with senior management, and teams in the four library divisions.

The study focused also on the UK, University and library quality contexts, with particular reference to the 2008 LibQUAL+ survey results.

The findings and recommendations from this exercise relevant to organizational and staff matters included:

- (1) LibQUAL+ scores relatively low, so ... improve using data.
- (2) Culture values precedent and regulation, so ...:
 - move the focus from “budget” to “real costs”;
 - from “regulation” to “user perspective”; and
 - from risk aversion to “why not?”.
- (3) Review collection development, liaison and the acquisition process.
- (4) Seek areas of collaboration between Library and the Archives.

These were perceptive and insightful findings, and a set of interventions were defined to develop a more positive, open and customer-oriented culture, including:

- (1) Middle management training with a quality focus.
- (2) All staff Away-Day 2009 (“User perspectives on library value”).
- (3) Project methods and styles definition and development.
- (4) Academic liaison (AL) transformation, involving:
 - substantial investment;
 - hierarchy removal; and
 - removal of excessive AL touch elements in the library acquisition processes.
- (5) Role development and career path support.

University staff surveys (2008 and 2011)

University staff surveys were introduced on a three-year cycle in 2008, providing valuable data on staff satisfaction and opinion. Initially provided by Capita (in 2008), these were later undertaken by ORC International (in 2011 and 2014), but the basic instrument and product remained the same. This survey is used by around 20 UK Universities, and presumably this includes their libraries. There is therefore some benchmarking available, but this is limited to a benchmark score of other participants, with no opportunity to identify specific exemplars. There are around 100 item questions (for which results are presented as scaled agreement percentages), but these can be added to locally. Not every university therefore uses all the questions, again limiting benchmarking.

The basic assumption is as stated above of a direct link between staff perceptions and service quality:

[...] staff perceptions have been identified through Capita's research as being linked directly to the quality of services provided by staff within organisations (from the University of York results, 2008).

There was, however, no attempt to link any of York's individual departmental service satisfaction scores from other sources back to the staff survey results to justify this claim.

The paradigm framework for the survey is "Engagement". Engagement can be defined as "a combination of commitment to the organization and its values, plus a willingness to help out colleagues (organizational citizenship)" and is regarded as "beyond job satisfaction, and is not simply motivation" to differentiate it from these conceptually simpler and more long-standing concepts (Morgan, 2007). Penna's (2015) hierarchy of engagement provides a Maslow style pyramid of increasing engagement which builds from a base of satisfaction with pay, working hours and conditions through learning and development and promotion opportunities to the higher levels of confidence in leadership, trust and respect, and ultimately in work which has meaning for the individual.

In the York context, however, an Engagement Index for each department was provided based on a small basket of item scores on the principle that engagement could be defined through three elements:

- (1) "say": whether people say good things about the organization;
- (2) "stay": whether people wish to remain in the organization; and
- (3) "strive": whether people are happy to provide discretionary effort.

This index was not developed through any broad consultation, and could be regarded as questionable in the context of a world-class university in which career progression is likely to result in staff turnover rather than stability, or in a service context in which what people do is rather more important than what they say about the organization. As will be seen later, this index did not generate much support or confidence from library staff.

The rationale for considering the results of these two surveys together is to gauge what progress had been made since the interventions generated by ESP around the time of the first university survey. Whilst there was improvement in some areas, there was a sense amongst the library leadership that more progress might have been achieved, and specifically about why some item scores had either not improved or worsened.

Response rates from the two surveys were good, with an increase from 63 per cent in 2008 to 85 per cent in 2011.

Strong headline findings (based on positive percentage agreements) were:

- Clarity on expected behaviour: 93 per cent.
- Work contribution: 88 per cent.
- Discrimination (lack of): 87 per cent.
- “Ability to voice opinions” was 19 points above the UK benchmark.

Findings of concern included an Engagement index of 71 per cent in 2008 (which placed the Library fourth from last in York departments), and very low agreement scores for:

- Dealing with poor staff performance: 7 per cent (33 points below the UK benchmark).
- Clear career path: 12 per cent.
- Performance discussions outside annual reviews: 15 per cent.

Comparison of the two survey results identified issues that had resisted improvement or declined in scores:

- senior management communication;
- consultation, involvement and change;
- feedback in relation to performance;
- poor performance management; and
- lack of career development plan.

It should be noted that the last three of these items had weak scores across most of the University.

The author initiated a series of staff meetings on a team basis following the second survey to understand in more depth what was lacking in their lived experience and what might be done to address the resistant issues. The findings from staff meetings were clear; staff appeared to have no problem with specifying exactly what was good and bad about their experience at work. In brief summary:

- staff did not believe they were disengaged, and felt insulted by the survey engagement index score;
- there was substantial dissatisfaction around listening, involvement and empowerment;
- many simple practical issues were raised, indicating lack of effective escalation routes; and
- the expression of issues by library staff was highly emotional, in marked contrast to the IT staff meetings.

The author came away from these meetings with a strong sense of some sub-cultures of victimhood, in which staff in particular areas felt powerless to either question or influence their work context, especially at times of challenge. Some parts of the organization and some individual members appeared to lack the resilience to meet the changing context. Immediate actions were taken to resolve practical and environmental problems raised, for example, more effective window blinds for some of the new staff offices, but questions remained about why these issues had not been dealt with through normal management processes.

ClimateQUAL Survey (2012)

The findings from the staff surveys, and the mode of expression of complaint in survey comments and staff meetings suggested further investigation through an instrument more attuned to the emotional (or “affective”) dimensions of the workplace. The extension of the ARL ClimateQUAL survey to the UK academic library community provided an opportunity to measure staff’s perceptions of “climate”.

Climate can be defined as “recurring patterns of behaviour, attitudes and feelings that characterize life in the organization” (Bessant and Tidd, 2009) and thus differentiated from culture which is suggested to be more about the assumptions underpinning values, norms and beliefs (Schein, 2010). Van den Berg and Wilderom (2004) suggest that it might be wise to assess both culture and climate, as the latter is more focused on observable practices and “the current state of affairs”. As we shall see these distinctions are blurred, as the instruments used throughout this study all have points of commonality. However, again we see an assumption that staff affect will have a direct link to organizational performance.

ClimateQUAL (Association of Research Libraries, 2015b) has been offered in around 50 institutions to date (and 35 at the time of the York survey) with some repeat surveys. There is some published previous experience on ClimateQUAL in case libraries (e.g. Mengel *et al.*, 2013; Phipps *et al.*, 2013) providing valuable learning to be drawn on. Interestingly both these cases found the need to improve staff experience related to some elements of engagement in Penna’s hierarchy. Mengel’s suggestion that “organizational level thinking is crucial” appears valid, and it is reassuring to see others “wrestling with ways to facilitate constructive organizational change” and that this is underpinned by “the intent of measuring whether articulated organizational values were achieved”.

The suggestion to run ClimateQUAL was not particularly well-received by the senior team at York. The refurbishment and extension project was drawing to a close, and the managerial perception was that negative feelings would be running high after three years of painful disruption. The author’s view was that this would provide a low baseline on which to judge future improvement.

ClimateQUAL is, as the others described here, a web-based survey with approximately 150 questions about the library as a whole, and teams and individuals. Again comments can be made. As with other ARL products the process of offering and conducting the survey was smooth and straightforward. In total, 119 of York’s 125 Library and Archives staff completed the questionnaire, providing a very high 95 per cent response rate, and indicating that staff felt they had things to say.

ClimateQUAL measures nine climates and seven attitudes of staff affect. This number of dimensions and the technical terminology makes results not as intuitively presentable to library staff as, for example, those from ARL’s LibQUAL+ surveys. However, the demographic data included and the extensive report provided through the service mean that much more could be gleaned from this data than in the university staff surveys, particularly in relation to sub-cultures in individual team areas.

To summarize the key findings (again expressed as scaled percentage agreements), and noting that these are measures of the staff perception of climates (as opposed to actual service quality or delivery).

Strengths:

- Diversity: 88-96 per cent.
- Interpersonal conflict (absence): 85 per cent.

- Team benefit: 79 per cent.
- Task engagement: 76 per cent.

Areas of majority disagreement:

- Job satisfaction: 48 per cent.
- Deep diversity: 48 and 36 per cent.
- Organizational citizenship: 45 per cent.
- Continual learning: 42 per cent.
- Psychological safety: 38 per cent.

Areas regarded as deep concerns due to very low agreement scores:

- Customer service: 28 per cent.
- Justice: 26-18 per cent.
- Psychological empowerment: 21 per cent.
- Facilitation of teamwork: 20 per cent.

The key agenda for improvement from this survey supported previous findings, but also added some additional issue revealed by the instrument:

- customer service climate;
- excellence policy and orientation;
- teamwork and leadership;
- job design, method and behaviours;
- empowerment and innovation;
- permission;
- recognition and reward; and
- up, down and sideways listening.

Further analysis comparing York's results to the means of the UK cohort and the 35 North American participants was however reassuring in that the pattern of lower scores at York followed the pattern in other institutions. In other words, what York appeared to struggle with, every other library undertaking the survey was also struggling with. This does perhaps imply there are some fundamental and structural problems in their lived experience that all libraries need to address.

It was in the survey comments that the full weight of staff concerns was eloquently expressed. The survey provided an almost cathartic opportunity for the relief of feelings engendered over the difficult years of the refurbishment, and this was in some cases accompanied by an apology for the mode of expression.

To provide some examples (with a positive starting point):

- "generally speaking the library is a great place to work [...] It is one of the best organisations I have worked in in terms of support, fairness and working conditions";
- "there is a huge amount of positive work going on and that needs to be understood and celebrated";

- “I feel strongly that my opinions about working practices and/or solutions to problems are not listened to”;
- “[there is] a discrepancy between grades and levels of responsibility”;
- “lack of recognition, support [and] encouragement for members of staff who are highly competent”;
- “lack of consultation about changes”;
- “senior management are so far removed from the everyday workings of the Library that they have no idea how their staff feel”;
- “I feel that the recent award won by the library was a hollow victory [...] we speak of excellence and values [...] I believe this has been earned at the expense of staff”; and
- “sorry for the rant [...] there are many good things happening too”.

There were some negative comments about the modernization of the library environment, services and working practices achieved through the refurbishment, perhaps reflecting a traditionalist viewpoint in some staff:

- “I have a problem with the changes that have taken place”;
- “gimmicks [...] such as allowing students to eat, drink and talk in more areas”; and
- “the [book-sorting] machine was a complete waste of money”.

The literature suggests that high levels of emotion in the workplace are likely at times of disruptive change, and especially when there is a sense that some staff groups are worse off than others, and consequently perceive injustice in their treatment. Kickul *et al.* (2002) suggest that unintended breaches of the psychological contract will be viewed by employees as unfair, and that there can in these situations be a collusive emotional process that prompts people to act in line with specific games outlined by the local culture. Smollan (2012) supports the view that “justice is important to those experiencing organizational change [...] injustice is particularly emotional and has negative personal and emotional consequences”. This may result in “[expression] in affect laden terms from the mute to the more intense [including] being ‘absolutely furious’”.

There is though a question about how important staff affect is in relation to the overall objective of improving the library. A balance between happy staff and radical improvement had to be struck in this case. Affect is also momentary; it can therefore change rapidly in the long periods between staff surveys. It was interesting that many staff asked for a swift repeat of the ClimateQUAL survey soon after the refurbishment was complete, in order to provide a new (and presumably more positive) statement of their view of the organization. This suggests that the survey was measuring some dimensions of affect in relation to a current, but temporary, state of affairs.

People strategy, structure, methods (2013)

The conclusions drawn from these surveys was that a more strategic and fundamental approach to improving the staff experience was required, and that this should involve structural as well as cultural change. There were a number of components to the approach to changing staff satisfaction and climate for the better.

Values. A new value set was developed through all staff participation, including group consultation through a staff festival away-day and subsequent voting. Whilst the new set was not be surprising, it was seen to be developed and agreed by all, and could therefore be used as a tie-breaker in assessing whether work behaviours at any level were consonant with these espoused values. The list was:

- (1) Customer focus:
 - excellent service.
- (2) Scholarship:
 - add value to research, teaching, learning;
- (3) Vision, inspiration and empowerment:
 - dynamic, flexible, forward thinking;
- (4) Respect.
- (5) Honesty and transparency:
 - communicate openly.

For the first time there was explicit and clear buy-in from all to excellence and to responding positively to visionary change, as well as to respectful, open and honest discourse.

People strategy. A new information strategy was developed for the University during 2012/2013 and endorsed by the Information Strategy Group at the end of that academic year. The strategy model adopted specifically required staff capability and culture to be an essential supporting pillar for the four core programmes. A people strategy was included in the overall statement as a confidential appendix, and what follows below is largely taken from that document.

What was different from previous strategies was the acceptance that organizational structure, at least in the Information Directorate, should follow the strategy, rather than strategy being seen as something happening outside (and distracting from) operational structures and activities. This begged a number of questions:

- What is the correct structure for strategy and change (momentum)?
- What is the correct structure for engagement?
- What is the correct structure for empowerment?
- What is the right scale and style for teamwork?

These were not questions that had been previously asked, but now there was much more evidence available from staff to make some judgments about these matters. In particular team scale and supervision was something that varied greatly across the Directorate, because teams were historically formed to meet perceived operational demands rather than on the basis of what might be managerially rational or best for strategic development.

Strategic choice and structures. In common with the overall information strategy, “information flow” was considered to be the primary goal, and that human capital management within the Directorate should also use this concept as the main control mechanism. In simpler terms, we should manage on the basis of data and ensure both discourse, debate and developments were conducted and achieved in a rational

evidence-based climate. Key to this was the adoption and implementation of the Value Scorecard, engaging all areas of the Directorate in systematic performance reporting. The Human Capital Dimension Framework (Town, 2014) was adopted for people-related measurement.

A specific structural choice was taken to reduce silo over-control that had been diagnosed as being detrimental to personal development, strategy, project contribution or flexible service peak management. Whilst this was to apply at all levels, the commitment was made visible to all by the removal of the Divisional structure within the Directorate, opportunistically reducing the existing senior manager cohort from eight to five and removing that intermediate layer between service units and Director level. Each of the ten service unit leaders now became part of the senior management team, and the Directorate overall structure could be expressed for the first time as two levels on a single sheet of paper. This flattening of the structure was intended to reduce hierarchical transaction costs, and improve communication between staff and the senior team. This would also continue the cultural transformation through the increased trust, respect and transparency demanded by the agreed values. Other structural changes included strengthening programme and administrative support for the strategy, so that it became an embedded and resourced feature rather than a bolted-on option.

Staff proposition. There was a recognition that a full and clear staff proposition was required for our context. In simple terms, everyone should be clear about what the deal is. The core of this is the idea that staff are not independent from the service; staff are employed to deliver and develop excellent services first and foremost, as recognized in the values statement.

Beyond this, all elements of the staffing context needed to be defined more closely and applied more consistently. The elements again bear similarity to Penna's engagement hierarchy:

- pay scales, recognition, reward;
- work content for satisfaction;
- attraction, retention, promotion;
- learning and development offer;
- leadership and teamwork;
- listening and communication;
- trust, respect, justice, diversity; and
- meaning.

University actions were also required to assist in improved reward and recognition systems, and to facilitate specific elements of this effort.

Implementation plan. An implementation plan composed of specific projects was developed for the people strategy in a similar way to that taken in the rest of the information strategy. Conceptual as well as practical development was required to assist in the formation of a new psychological contract with staff, and to change practices and behaviours. Some specific examples of projects or actions undertaken included:

- (1) Customer Service Excellence (CSE; see more below).
- (2) Proposition review.

- (3) Value Scorecard implementation.
- (4) Generic role/grade adoption.
- (5) Rational team sizes and teamwork development:
 - team leadership definition; and
 - team leader development.
- (6) “Superteam” approach involving flexible deployment for operational requirements from different teams.
- (7) Policy and behaviour guidance.
- (8) Better career and development support through a tailored portfolio approach.
- (9) Better project support from central project managers and business analysts.
- (10) Contextual development plans separated from deemed objectives.
- (11) Separation of “pastoral” line management and task supervision.

The outcomes sought from this included:

- excellence, innovation and change as embedded givens;
- management control through data;
- reduction of the hierarchy concept to three “layers” (strategy/management/service);
- increased flexibility and empowerment; and
- a broader range of development opportunities.

University staff survey (2014)

The most recent University staff survey was used as a means of testing whether the odyssey was approaching its destination in terms of improving the lived experience, and particularly those elements that the interventions had been designed to enhance.

The response rate from the whole Directorate staff was an increased 88 per cent (85 per cent in 2011), and the departmental engagement rating was 79 per cent (73 per cent in 2011). Spectacular improvements were observed in many items; 35 out of the 105 questions showed agreement gains of ten percentage points or more, and a few questions saw increases of more than 20 points. Whilst some of these might be seen as a result of staff coming out of a disrupted environment, the context for the library was still challenging, with new research services required and a new information strategy to implement in a period of rapid student growth.

The highest percentage agreement scores obtained were as follows:

- I am clear about the standards of behaviour expected of me in my role: 95 per cent (= first in the University).
- I think my department delivers good quality service to students and service users: 90 per cent.
- I feel safe and secure in my working environment: 89 per cent (= third in the University).

The most improved items were:

- I believe action will be taken in my department in response to the results of this survey: 44 per cent (+24 points = first in the University).
- I am satisfied with my physical working conditions: 76 per cent (+23 points).
- I believe that action will be taken in the University in response to this survey: 50 per cent (+22 points = third in the University).

However, some items still proved resistant to improvement, or perhaps required longer periods for staff to see improvements:

- I believe there is a clear career path available to me at the university: 15 per cent (second lowest in the University).
- I feel that poor staff performance is dealt with appropriately in my department: 23 per cent (lowest in the University).
- Too many approvals are needed for routine decisions in my department: 31 per cent.

The most striking findings from this iteration of the survey were revealed by the additional analytics provided for the first time. Items of interest could be analysed and subsequently visualized to show breakdowns by age, gender, length of tenure and grade. Of particular note were:

- There is little variation of the engagement index across all categories.
- “Lack of career path” perception is worse for women than men.
- “Lack of career path” perception is worse for those on the lowest grades, and is halved after two years of tenure.
- “Too many approvals” is worse for women than men, and for those on lower grades, but shows little relation to tenure.
- “Dealing with poor staff performance” shows little variation by tenure, but is more strongly perceived on lower grades.
- “Involvement in decisions” is worse perceived by women and lower grades.

Much of the analytic data counters library received wisdom that older or more long-standing staff are bound to be more dissatisfied and unhappy about change; at York the most satisfied with pace of change are in the 45-54 age bracket; the most unhappy are those between three and five years of tenure.

The most worrying analytic for senior managers is that nearly three quarters of staff who are new to the department believe communications from senior team level are honest, but that this steeply declines with tenure, so that less than a third agree with this after ten years. This may in the case library be a reflection of assumptions in staff recruited prior to the current leadership regime.

Collaborative Leadership Programme (CLP) (2015)

The CLP was introduced to the university as a means of assessing and improving academic departmental leadership. Support departments were offered the chance to join the second cohort, and in keeping with the commitment to evidence-based improvement, the Information Directorate chose to take up the programme. It was one of only two support services to do so.

The basic research question was “do we lead well?” The underlying belief in the University was that “Leadership & management of [...] constituent units has never been as critical to future success” and that there was a need “to build capability and confidence of management teams in departments to face the challenges of the evolving HE environment”. As with the other investigations there was an implicit assumption about the causal connection between good leadership and departmental effectiveness.

Yet another conceptual framework had to be absorbed for this programme. Salmi’s (2009) report (with a picture of a University Library on its cover) has given rise to an excellence instrument for application at departmental level. This is based on the view that world class universities have three complementary attributes:

- talent concentration;
- leadership encouragement (“favourable governance” in Salmi’s report); and
- resource abundancy (for a rich learning environment).

The programme at York was conducted and supported through central HR, but external consultant-led. Workshops were conducted in the presence of the other support service involved, and this provided a little joint working, but no subsequent benchmarking or sharing of results. The consultant had broad experience of universities across the UK and internationally, and was able to provide comparative conclusions.

The data sources were again a staff survey with 29 items, but supplemented by 12 in-depth interviews with a cross-section of senior managers, service unit leaders and middle managers; seven team effectiveness questionnaire returns from the participating Directorate leadership team, and five stakeholder interviews with senior university staff.

In total, 126 departmental excellence surveys (56 per cent of staff) were returned providing the evidence below (expressed as before in percentage agreements).

The highest excellence scores were for:

- Focus on high quality: 85 per cent.
- Systematic feedback sought: 84 per cent.
- Acts on feedback: 78 per cent.
- Discretionary effort: 76 per cent.
- Clear purpose and vision: 76 per cent.

The lowest excellence scores were (ascending):

- Activity costs understood: 53 per cent.
- Two way communication: 55 per cent.
- Dealing with poor performance: 55 per cent.
- Redeploying resources: 57 per cent.
- Conflict handling: 57 per cent.

The highest team effectiveness scores were for:

- Excellence: 94 per cent.
- Meeting need: 91 per cent.

- High standards: 89 per cent.
- Knowledge: 83 per cent.
- Knowing what it takes: 83 per cent.

The lowest team effectiveness scores were for:

- Use of structured techniques: 26 per cent.
- Saying “We” and meaning it: 40 per cent.
- Reviewing working: 40 per cent.
- Redefining roles: 43 per cent.
- Use of core values in decisions: 49 per cent.

Many of these findings appear to corroborate both the successes and the issues evidenced from the University staff survey, and were consequently already being addressed in action plans. The instrument reveals more about resource issues given its conceptual basis, and the findings relating to redeployment of resources might be taken to be critical of resource flexibility. A low score for understanding of activity costs was not considered detrimental; the policy is to encourage a sense of efficiency improvement, but not to worry front-line staff unduly with financial data. Of more concern was the low score for use of structured techniques, given the strength of project methodology in the Directorate, and this requires further investigation. A range of useful comments was received, and the tone of these was markedly more “rational” and outward-looking than in the previous surveys described above.

Senior stakeholders provided a list of 12 activity priorities, all of which were already recognized in the University’s information strategy.

The extensive commentary from the consultant was probably the most valuable element of this work. This included some critique of the perceived style of the Directorate’s senior team in their interactions with each other, as well as the observation that successful organizations tend to have smaller management teams than our deliberately extended approach. There was also the probably inevitable expression of dissatisfaction from some who do not wish to espouse loyalty to a joined up information enterprise, but would prefer to remain in professional silos:

There does not appear to be total legitimacy for the Directorate as currently constituted.

This is a curious expression given that the university decides what structure is legitimate at this level.

One important theme suggests that the pace of innovation and the achievement of excellent service in our area of the business may not result in completely happy staff:

[...] [having] very talented staff [...] can lead to a sense of perfectionism and frustration when issues don’t quite work or are slow to change.

A strong view was the prevailing psychological contract [is] the notion of a “job for life” [...] but this would seem implausible given the strong performance of the Talent category.

“The York Way” was regularly cited.

In other words, staff may feel that they are performing at a high level, but often feel subjectively that others are not, or that the wider organizational culture is actively inhibiting improvement.

However, this investigation provided very strong approbation for the Directorate's overall performance and culture:

Embedded excellence marks this Directorate out from other parts of the University, and from other Universities, and this achievement is unusual. The University has much to learn from what has been done here, and it provides what should be a model [...].

The latter recommendation has not yet been followed up.

Emergent projects affecting culture

This case would not be complete without mentioning a number of specific emergent projects and interventions that have been undertaken in the period, with the intention of improving culture or structure, and that are judged to have been influential.

Cultural and developmental

Undertaking the UK national CSE standard with award in 2014 and successful reaccreditation with additional "compliance plus" ratings in 2015 appeared to have a profound effect on staff and their perceptions of commitment to customer service. This was reflected in the most recent University staff survey and the CLP findings. The systematic framework and standard setting required for CSE pervaded all areas of the Directorate in a wholly positive manner.

The creation of an annual staff (development) festival, with a focus on bringing all staff together once a year with some serious development purpose, but accompanied by activities with either a play, fun or personal well-being agenda, has also had a positive cultural impact. This has also included events to engage the families of staff.

The University has continued to develop its own programmes for management, leadership and excellence across the period, and this has supported the Directorate's efforts. The only issue here is the lack of sufficient consultation to develop a fully shared conceptual basis of what management and leadership mean within the service activities of the University. This is now being recognized in an initiative focused on support staff across the University titled "Professional@York", and has been well received by Directorate staff. A Career Development Portfolio initiative has been developed within the Directorate to offer a tailored programme for staff who wish to develop their professional careers, and the early signs from this are very encouraging. There are however not as many takers for this as the dissatisfaction with career path findings might suggest. York is introducing a new review system for all staff with the intent of this having an effect on the low perceptions of management of poor performance across the University. Whether this will make a difference to day-to-day behaviour is questionable, and may have other negative consequences for what is currently a well-received system with very high participation within the library.

Structural

Further structural changes within some service units have been undertaken as a follow-through on the people strategy, particularly to further reduce hierarchy and the over-control identified in surveys. These have been focused on areas where these dissatisfactions have been higher over the period, specifically customer services, in which a full new service model has been created based on experience of 24/7 working, and specific investigations of user demand for higher level services across opening

hours; and content services, in which there is a requirement to absorb new types of collection and respond more structurally to digital developments. Relationship management structure has also been developed to meet the new research and pedagogic agendas in the University and sector, as suggested elsewhere (Town, 2015).

Discussion and conclusions

It would be optimistic to conclude that in this case staff satisfaction, strategy, structures and methods of working are all now completely aligned with values. There is more to do, and perhaps too much variation in task and not enough freedom within the corporate context and grading structures to achieve a perfect answer for all. The adhocism available in some professional teams is clearly a source of high satisfaction, but this method of working is not easily applicable to either the process or front-of-house services that require a more disciplined, organized and closely collaborative approach. This is however not an excuse for leadership to ignore these issues, but to put measures in place to ensure that all can be properly recognized and rewarded for their particular contributions. There is evidence from the case that the removal of unnecessary hierarchy, attention to shared values, provision of development opportunities, challenging of negative cultural web stories and the heightening of commitment to excellence in service can improve the perceived experience of staff.

It is also possible to do this in a context where the quantitative and qualitative data and evidence arises from multiple methods based on different conceptual frameworks. The act of engaging with these methods, and the implicit message to staff that their opinions and feelings are important provides a benefit irrespective of the specific instrument. Staff in the case library have proved willing to engage with a succession of different approaches, without much complaint about the instruments.

Performativity, in the sense of improving organizational effectiveness through measurement, is the underlying rationale for these investigations, but the relationship between intervention and improvement is not always clear, and it is hard to provide explicit causal links. Is the link between staff affect and excellent service proven? From the case study it might seem too complex to take this essentially reductionist reading of the world of people at work. However across the period in which the investigations took place there were 20 percentage point increases in some items of staff satisfaction, a 12 point increase in the Library NSS scores (78-90 per cent on Question 16), and a 12.6 per cent increase in the LibQUAL+ overall satisfaction item, so there might appear to some correlation here. There is also little doubt that the organization has been transformed during this period. Perhaps both excellent service and happy staff should be pursued as worthy ends and public goods in their own right.

It is clear that commitment to evidence and intervention in this area of performance can produce improved results over the long term, although some issues seem strongly resistant to change, at least in this case. It may be wise to strip the instruments of items that the organization has no intention of delivering as part of its formal or psychological contract. This particularly applies to an implied guarantee of career path for all, as opposed to support for career development.

A key learning point has been that cultural stories are often in conflict with objective scores or reality. There is also still an observable tendency for staff to cling to long-held myths about the organization despite evidence to the contrary. This suggests that narrative replacement should be an active part of management at all levels to reinforce improvements and shift the culture to more positive expressions.

Finally, the analytics from the 2014 survey reveal that gender, grade and tenure differences produce variation within some individual item scores. If this is true across libraries generally, then as managers and leaders we cannot leave these inconsistencies unaddressed. A situation in which women, the lower paid or the longer-serving appear to have a worse lived experience in any facet of work is unacceptable.

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Further reading

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About the author

J. Stephen Town is the Director of Information and University Librarian at the University of York, UK. Stephen has taught, researched, presented, consulted and written widely on library management, strategy and performance measurement. Stephen is the Convenor and Chair of the Editorial Board of the Northumbria International Conference on Library Performance Measurement, is a member of the Boards of the Library Assessment Conference (North America), *Performance Measurement and Metrics*, and the LibQUAL+ Steering Committee (ARL). J. Stephen Town can be contacted at: stephen.town@york.ac.uk

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