

Living the Future II

Organizational changes for success

by BethAnn Zambella

When the University of Arizona (UA) Library started reorganizing in 1992, peer institutions were curious. So UA sponsored a conference in May 1996 called "Living the Future: Process Improvement and Organizational Change at the University of Arizona." Now that almost every academic library is navigating the whitewater of institutional change, librarians at UA responded to demands for more with "Living the Future II (LTF II): Organizational Changes for Success," in Tucson, Arizona, April 21–24, 1998.

While the first conference focused almost exclusively on changes at UA, LTF II solicited presentations from librarians at institutions worldwide. The official themes included "partnerships," "information literacy," "new services and their impact on organizations," "human resources issues," and "organizational changes." However, the keynote speakers, and the speakers who introduced them, brought more global and compelling themes to the forefront.

The first idea we were asked to ponder was that of librarians as reluctant center-stage players. Peter Likins, president of UA, heard more than murmurs of assent when he suggested that many of the 150 or so attendees had probably planned on a "life of quiet decline among good books" when they signed on with the profession.

In the current information age, such a life on the sidelines is no longer an op-

tion. But, Likins emphasized, life center stage doesn't mean we're alone. We just have to give up the idea that organizations can be managed according to Newtonian mechanics, where everything is "clean, pure, beautiful, orderly, deterministic, and comforting." Instead, we have to look to the model of the chaos theory and find comfort in the drama of stars, supporting cast members, and the audience being "all in it together."

Change the way you change

Keynoter Meg Wheatley echoed Likins' sentiments and elaborated on some scientific models of her own. Wheatley, an organizational consultant, professor at Brigham Young University, and president of the Berkana Institute (a research foundation working on the design of new organizations) has authored *Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organizations from an Orderly Universe* and, with Myron Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way*. The image of librarians poised at center stage was juxtaposed with our ultimate humility in the face of life as an organizing principle.

Wheatley suggested that we have to "change the way we change." From the single-celled organism to what scientists now believe are about 100 million species, we are the only species to consider change, creativity, and learning to be prob-

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lems. Or perhaps, Wheatley quipped, the other species have just been to training sessions.

Her central image hangs on the observation that independence is not a biological construct, but a political one. The lone visionary leader who pulls the reluctant organization into its future by sheer force is a flawed concept. Wheatley's recurring mantra: "People only support what they create." The Newtonian view of people as predictable and controllable is also passé. "You can never direct a living system," says Wheatley, referring to the work of biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, "you can only disturb it" and hope to get its attention.

Wheatley closed by summarizing her biological/organizational take on life: Life is systems-seeking and attracted to order, but often passes through messy, complex stages en route; and life is self-organizing—we organize in response to what's meaningful to us, by accessing the intelligence found everywhere in the system. Wheatley's view debunks the myth of "communication problems." We aren't failing to communicate, but failing to "create a world whose significance we share."

Gather 'round the fire

Shared meaning permeated Ernie Ingles' keynote address, "From the Faraway Nearby." Using Georgia O'Keefe's 1937 canvas as a departure point, Ingles, the associate vice president of Learning Systems at the University of Alberta, asked us to consider how the interplay between the social and natural worlds should make us feel humble, but often doesn't. Ingles' lyrical and poetic address used the ideals of confluence and harmony to explore our place in both real and virtual landscapes.

From the oral tradition to the global information highway, Ingles said, librarians "make the unknown known, and the far-away seem nearby."

Ingles' most enduring metaphor resurfaced again and again during the conference following his eloquent introduction—the image of a Native American storyteller and her community gathering around the fire.

Librarians latched on to the fire metaphor, insisting that we make room at the fire for everyone, that we not only tell our stories around the fire, but that we celebrate them, too.

During the conference wrap-up panel discussion, Carla Stoffle, dean of the libraries at UA, emphasized that our gathering around the fire embodies what libraries as organizations are all about—bringing our values to information and to the people with whom we share that information.

The other presenters at the conference told their stories in a variety of ways. Contributed papers and two sets of poster sessions, one focusing on the UA Library, covered the spectrum of official themes listed earlier. For a snapshot of the program, and, ultimately, online proceedings, visit www.library.arizona.edu/conference/ltf2.htm. While the presentations sparked ideas and discussion, with the exception of two or three notable efforts, they seldom included an active learning component. We hope that the referees for LTF III will keep this challenge in mind when developing the criteria for that program, tentatively scheduled for April 2000.

In the interim, we will all have time to further reflect on our concomitant celebrity and humility in the face of organizational and informational change. ■

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