Editorial Commentary: 51 Insights, Perceptions, and a Few Things That I Think Are Important to Professional and Personal Progress

By Stephen Abram

I recently wrote a blog post advocating for better development and support of our high potential library staff in our profession, although developing everyone is the real goal. We need greater capacity in our staff complements to achieve great things. Library staffs are not cogs in the industrial model. Here's the link:

http://stephenslighthouse.com/2012/11/28/personal-editorial-managing-high-potential-employees-in-libraries-the-rock-star-dillemma/

We're knowledge workers who have a great and measurable positive impact on individuals and our society and economy. But within this context I believe that managing knowledge workers is different. I believe that it is less about 'skills' and more about professional and personal competencies for thinking, influence and teamwork as well as creating a dynamic, supportive work environment.

I've trod this path before and wrote open letters a while back to my Boomer peers and to my new colleagues in our profession. Here are the links:

An Open Letter to My Boomer Peers
Information Outlook, April 2008 Issue
by Stephen Abram

An Open Letter to My New Peers
Information Outlook, May 2008 Issue
by Stephen Abram

http://stephenslighthouse.com/2011/02/22/open-letters-to-my-peers-young-and-my-age/

That said several recent commenters made the totally valid point that it's not just management's responsibility to develop staff but that it's also a staff and personal responsibility to take some ownership of their own careers and personal development. I agree. There are also some key skills in 'managing up' that take some work (and time and practice) to learn and aren't necessarily intuitive nor are they always supported in some institutional cultures or by some management or bosses. Indeed, all workplaces are rife with stories of militaristic styles and hierarchies that, in my opinion work badly in our knowledge-based workplaces or by the 'bad boss' who exerts control or personal power out of the context of the goal of creating good workplace cultures and innovation and flexibility in times of dynamic change. If I had a magic wand to make these bosses better or to make them move on, I would! Of course, I can't do that and the only reasonable approach is to learn how to deal with it or move on yourself. I'm not in favour of

chaos, abandoning your workplace without trying, and I'm not the only person who thinks that workplaces are overly regulated, driven by aging rules or don't consider people issues enough of a priority. This is a recipe for disaster in adapting to the asynchronous and asymmetrical forces for change that we find ourselves, our profession, our society and our workplaces immersed in. And that's not an environment that's limited to any specific type of library or knowledge workplace. One of my favourite bosses used to tell us that the dinosaurs didn't go extinct because the climate changed, many disappeared because they couldn't or wouldn't adapt to the changes. The one's that succeeded may have become birds or stayed smaller and more flexible. Some moved to better environments. It's not a perfect metaphor but there's some insight in it.

So, this editorial is some of my personal views of what helps a career, and not incidentally, a profession and our institutions. I don't think it's complete but it is some of the stuff I've I learned in over 35 years of working in libraries. Is any of it useful? Maybe, maybe not. Each of the points below has at least one story underpinning my learning journey and usually many (I'm not done yet and still have much still to learn). As I wrote this piece I was surprised how many little rules and insights drive my perceptions of working with people, libraries, publishing, vendors, innovation and product or service development. And, as I find to always be the case, there was some pain and some gain associated with learning these insights. I can't guarantee that each philosophy will work as well for you as they do for me (or as they say YMMV – Your Mileage May Vary) or in every situation or environment. I've failed and I've succeeded. I've been hired, promoted, terminated and learned from each experience. Also, when I look them over I see that some are attitudes more than aptitudes. That's interesting to me. I've observed that attitude is everything and underpins resilience. When you're positive, positive things happen. Anyway, I have collected this list over a few years and thought that I would share it with you as we approach the New Year which is, I believe, a critical year for libraries and the information world. When I was writing this I was thinking in particular of what I've learned that might help colleagues in the early stages of their career where occasional frustration is normal, but, well, frustrating. Ambition is not a bad thing, but ambition alone is not enough. So here goes, this is what I think and feel:

1. **Emphasize emotions first**

I have found that when dealing with people that understanding emotions serves as a good starting point. It's easy to pigeonhole and stereotype people and then moderate our behaviours accordingly. We have many stereotypes – the Boss being a key one for us. There's a reason why the Boss in Dilbert remains nameless. Bosses are people too and understanding them as individuals with their own lives and challenges - personal, professional, political and organizational struggles - goes a long, long way to helping you get your ideas and suggestions heard and understood. Of course, it's a two-way street and you have to consider their ideas, context, and strategies fully too. We have a lot of

stereotypes and caricatures in our organizations – Boomers, Millennials, union members, politicians, bureaucrats, Teens, students, professors, deans, and more. See the human in everyone. Coffee or tea together is a good start.

Innovation is, by its very nature change. Change resistance is often an emotional response as well as good feedback. See resistance as feedback and see change as renewal, Renaissance, or improvement.   Change for change's sake is poor positioning.   Any change isn't better than no changes at all. The right change brings on the supportive emotions that drive behavioural support.

2. Shyness is not Introversion

I've observed many people in our field confuse shyness with introversion and use it as an excuse to stay back and only observe. Some pride themselves on their ability to remain silent in meetings! Introverts are often the best communicators since they offer second thought and considered opinions that often take more time to emerge. Allow for that or demand it, depending on your interpersonal preferences. When they use their strength of detailed thinking and planning for their interactions with decision-makers, and in presentations, they often excel. Everyone feels uncomfortable with confrontation but this isn't the only way to communicate with management or leaders. Discussions and interactions come in many flavours and facets. Crucial conversations need not be seen as confrontational.   A developed person has many interpersonal skills and many modes of behaviour and introverts often have more in their kitbag. If you don't invest in developing a spectrum of these skills your career can stall. The challenge is in knowing how to behave in a situationally appropriate way, rather than always being a one note song.

If you hide your ideas (or worse, start to believe that the only reason your idea is rejected is because you're 'hated'), you risk maturing well as a professional leader. At its worst it can result in behaviours that can only be called self-defeating or passive aggressive. It's sad when valid commentary on management strategies is sometimes cloaked in anonymity and, sometimes, snark, in social media and never allowed to truly air in the open or interpersonally with people who can listen, adapt these strategies or provide clarification and learning.

3. Ask first

You buy permission to get your ideas heard, to influence, and to get to a decision point. You don't do this with money. You do this by talking to people first – engaging them. Workshop your ideas with stakeholders first. Seek advice and perspectives – especially with older colleagues. Yes, some people will tell you we tried that idea ten years ago and it didn't work. Ignore the negativity and delve deeper. Why didn't they work? What was the original context and what has changed? Every salesperson and advocate knows that objections are not a 'no' nor are they stopping points. They are launching pads for further discussion,

clues as to what additional information or process might be needed, or opportunities to inform or educate.

If I see one common error in early stage careers it's when their good ideas fail to improve because the idea is presented fully formed with too little consultation first. This generates frustration in the idea presenter when folks don't necessarily perceive the merit in the idea or start to present objections. The opposite of love isn't hate, it is ambivalence. If they're engaging with your idea, you're halfway there! Often, some objections are because too little effort has been invested in understanding the needs and context of the decision-maker or too little effort has been invested in front end processes to engage others in the endorsement of the idea. Process and culture trump good ideas. You must marry both ideas and process to succeed.

4. Seek Promotion

Make it clear that you want opportunities. Seek promotion. Seek developmental opportunities on projects, teams, and committees. Some research, such as the 8 R's study of library workers in Canada, shows that a majority of our profession does not seek promotion. This is bad for our profession. Our future leaders cannot be developed if we don't have people moving up the ladder and choosing to develop. Also, see opportunities outside of your library. There are many ways to learn leadership and develop through volunteering, charities, associations, and on committees elsewhere in the organization. Don't let your professional development happen by default. Ladders are best climbed one or two steps at a time. Careers progress much the same way – not in great leaps. Sometimes it is not just about degrees, diplomas and certificates. Our profession often tries to gild CV's with proofs when experience and stories might better communicate your value. A key benefit of this is that colleagues get to know you in a more fulsome manner and these relationships, both internal and external, build trust and improve ideas.

5. Practice good followership

Progress happens with two cohorts – leaders and followers. Everyone plays both roles simultaneously. There are few people who get to be in complete dictatorial control! Indeed, by my definition, you're not a leader if you don't engage followers. Your good idea will make slow or no progress without followers. And, our organizations make poor progress if no one follows the plan to achieve the goals or fails to compromise timing in the context of near-term organizational priorities. As a wise person once said, first, seek to understand. If you want people to buy into your ideas and passions, then you build a support group with people that you follow well. Look at your organization's public commitments in things like the strategic plan, vision or mission statement and seek to align your idea(s).

6. Culture trumps strategy

I know that this is an aphorism. You can rarely achieve things strategically if the culture of the profession or organization doesn't hold it in their value system.   It's unlikely that most public sector libraries can adopt a for-profit strategy, for example. Your sector and your institutional framework have a culture. Learn about it. Understand it. Are they driven by data or not? Is it a storytelling culture where wisdom is handed down or travels the grapevine?   Is your idea about staff productivity or customer satisfaction? How does it align with target users, demographics, and markets? Is it growth oriented? Is it about the future or getting better about a core activity? Don't ignore your culture or feel defeated by it – understand it and work within it.

7. Compromise

Being inflexible won't get you too far. Learn how to display passion for your ideas while still showing flexibility and openness to allowing the idea to be owned by the group and be improved. Zealous and dogmatic behaviours turn people off and delay progress. Know what you can compromise on – maybe temporarily, and what is non-negotiable. There are two classic books in this arena that are must-reads for anyone seeking progress:

Getting To YES by Roger Fisher and William Ury
Getting Past NO by William Ury

For anyone who wants to lead and negotiate change, assertiveness is a good attribute but it can also drive resistance behaviours when it's overly evident.

8. Understand the boss's context

I've made the point that bosses are human too. So are politicians, the public, faculty, students, and your co-workers. In the boss's case, make sure you know about their pressures, their goals, and what context is being imposed upon them. It's a false conclusion that when tax revenue or when tax collection cash flow lags declines and budgets are affected, that this is somehow just anti-library. When a leader reduces the impact from a 35% reduction to 15% or ensures that cuts are fairer across the entire organization or community, then that's more success than failure. Additionally, when money is moved from one envelope to another for strategic reasons, understand the strategic context of that priority-setting exercise before engaging in outright criticism.   You may want to be in that decision-making position someday. Understand the bigger picture.

9. Be human and yourself

Don't change yourself 180 degrees but have many dimensions. Your personality is your greatest strength and hiding it too much in a false sense that it is more professional is a mistake. Not being yourself, or showing too little of your personality, will often just look phony. On the other hand, fully developed leaders and managers bring many behaviours and styles to work and make choices about when to use which aspects of their personality and when to use which

skills. This can include when you dress in certain ways – for interviews, or presentations, for working with kids or teens, for teaching, for board or political work. There are times to be soft and times to be confident. Know when. Sometimes the package can enhance the message. I am not one to be overly concerned by a wide range of hair styles or tattoos but it can be acknowledged that some people are more judgmental. Choose the personal presentation you make by audience. Know when to acknowledge emotions and when to use power.

I've waxed in about this before but using anonymity or pseudonyms should be used sparely. Your avatar or nickname does little to create a positioning for you as a fully-formed professional.

10. Volunteer - Don't wait to be asked

Don't say 'no' too often. When you're offered the opportunity to stretch yourself at work or in association activity, jump at it. You'll be part of a team and you'll learn from peers and more experienced folks. Everyone is in the same boat and you're all focused on success. Partner with your fellow members in chapters and divisions. Some chapters have calls for volunteers or volunteer in a general way through the main SLA website on our volunteer form. Be wary of saying your personal energy levels preclude involvement. Tired people don't get promoted.

You may love the library work and teams but there are clear professional benefits to working on teams outside the library. Hiring committees can build your network. University planning committees not only enhance your resume but you'll learn more about the whole context of the institution. It's worth the extra time and it's worth the stretch. I often hear managers say that if you want something done, ask a busy person.

11. Self-promotion

Very few people are going to toot your horn for you. Don't be a braggart but make sure you don't keep your candle under a basket. Don't fall into the trap of false modesty. If you contributed to success, say so. Be visible and don't just bring out your achievements at performance review time or tenure documents. And, give credit where credit is due. Your accomplishments will be noted and commended more if you compliment others (or nominate others or awards). Praise is a wonderful thing. Both parties benefit and you model the behaviours of a great workplace.

12. Develop yourself – invest

'Nuff said. Don't wait for all professional development – especially in the early stages of your career – to be financed and endorsed by your workplace. Choose activities that prepare you for the job, position or employer you want. Sometimes that won't be the one you're at, but the profession as a whole benefits. That's OK. You're not an indentured servant, a cog, and your employer doesn't have

the last word on how you develop or your full range of goals. That said, play the internal game well too.

By all means attend every association event you can. If your employer doesn't pay, go anyway. It's often the cost of a meal and if my experience is any indication, I've found positions that increased my pay a lot over the cost of the investment in learning and networking that comes from involvement in associations.

Don't sit at these meetings in a small group of people you already know. That may be networking but it is puny networking! Set a goal to meet at least two or more new people at every event you attend. If you need some tips search Google for networking for introverts. I've pointed to a number of these resources from my blog, *Stephen's Lighthouse*, and, although I am in no way introverted, I found some useful tips too.

You have great skills and fresh skills and modern skills. Don't pay heed to that little voice attacking your self-confidence from within. Offer to train local chapter members in some technology that you can introduce. You'll find willing learners who have something to exchange with you too. You'll build respect and equity and build your network of people with other deep experiences to share. I certainly learned how to ask for a raise from someone who'd 'been there, done that' and I hadn't.

13. Quality in all things

Focus on quality work but not on perfection. It's not just about the end result but also the journey. Think about future references. Those commendations aren't going to focus on the project or product but on how you contributed to the process, the skills you bring and what you were like to work with and the vision, competencies and behaviours you brought to the team.

14. Warren Bennis' rules

It wouldn't be a true librarian post without some book recommendations and I'm a devotee of Warren Bennis' leadership books and theories. He discusses "the qualities of the kind of leader that is needed in this generation. Bennis makes a sharp distinction between a leader and a manager. The manager does things right; the leader does the right things. The manager administers; the leader innovates. The manager maintains; the leader develops. The manager relies on control; the leader inspires trust. The manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it. Bennis maintains that our world needs a new generation of leaders, not managers if we have any hope of surviving. He discusses four things people look for in a leader including 1) purpose, direction or meaning, 2) trust, 3) a sense of we-can-do-it optimism; and 4) results. Further, he lists the four competencies of leaders including management of attention (they get everyone on the same page and working together), management of meaning (they communicate the vision), management of trust and management of self (they are

aware of their strengths and nurture them). Finally, in a broad stroke of the pen, Bennis adds ten vital traits of dynamic leaders. They include 1) self-knowledge, 2) openness to feedback, 3) eager to learn and improve, 4) curious, risk takers, 5) concentration at work, 6) learn from adversity, 7) balance tradition and change, 8) open style, 9) work well with systems, and 10) serve as models and mentors." [http://baldreformer.wordpress.com/2010/08/14/managing-people-is-like-herding-cats-warren-bennis-1999/] I recommend his books, especially *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge (2003)* and *On Becoming A Leader (2009), Managing People is Like Herding Cats* (1999) and *Geeks and Geezers (2002)*.

What's your goal? Do you want to be a great leader or a great manager? Both are good, true and valuable.

15. Balance (Have a life)
I talk to folks about this all the time. I am the worst example of short term balance. I struggle with keeping balance over the long term. That said, it's vitally important to know what's central to your happiness. You may lead a traditional or non-traditional life. It's all your choice but avoid becoming so narrow that work consumes all of your life. Also, don't focus too little on keeping your relationships balanced that you bring unhappiness into work. My personal solution is that I don't try to have daily balance but I schedule time for what I love – family time, friends, personal travel, live theatre, films, art, museums, hobbies, etc. - with the people I love.

16. Write and share
Really focus on building a good professional reputation above and beyond your workplace. Our profession needs your voice, experiences, perspectives, and insights. Write. Blog. Tweet. Share. We need more grist in our mill. Try to remain professional and positive, but don't shy away from difficult problems and issues. Some librarians, sometimes anonymous, just complain. If you're a leader you offer solutions and ideas for improvement. If you're a criticizer or whiner, you're better off staying anonymous. I try to offer solutions and positive change ideas (but fail sometimes with a rant or I draw undue attention), but it has helped my career immeasurably from the earliest days of electronic discussion lists. Share!

17. Kitchen table cabinets
There's no absolute need to develop just *formal* mentoring experiences. Lunch and coffee work just fine. Sometimes we have to break through our comfort zones and socialize with people who aren't just like us. Invite any colleague to coffee or lunch –at work, in your community or at a conference. A lot of advice and learning happens in those social conversations. I made personal and professional friends this way, you can too. Make an effort to identify and meet people who can help your career. Do you have a goal to work in a certain industry? Do you have a goal about what your next position will include? Do you

have a goal to learn something specific? Our profession is full of folks to meet. Use your research skills and contact them before a local meeting or conference. I try to keep a diverse group of friends and colleagues – young and old, librarians and non-librarians, across the political and industry spectrum. Don't be mercenary; just have a great conversation by breaking through your own comfort zone and connecting with new contacts, talents and colleagues. If your experience matches mine, some of the best and most valuable learning and contacts will be the result.

18. Learn beyond Tech: Presenting to senior management

Don't just invest in learning library stuff and technology. If there are gaps in competencies for newer librarians, it's in the soft skills. That's normal but if it lasts too long you may be on the technical ladder forever.   Here's a short list of skills that are underdeveloped in our field and thus make it difficult to move to management.   Build new competencies:

- Writing a position description that describes impact not activity
- Chairing a meeting
- Reference interviewing, research negotiation
- Information and research skills fluency training
- Designing products and services
- Promotion, sales and marketing
- Writing agendas and taking meeting notes
- Giving feedback to employees
- Attending a conference or corporate retreat
- Developing a business plan
- Participating in a vision exercise or developing a mission statement
- Writing a report, e-mail or memo for wide distribution
- Developing a budget
- Advocacy and politics, fundraising
- Asking for executive support or investment

Technical skills, the hard skills alone, won't get you to where you want to be. Soft skills are, in my opinion, more important and they're harder to learn and practice. Practice makes perfect and it IS called the practice of librarianship!

19. Open yourself up inter-generationally.

We need to break down some of the invisible demographic walls in our profession. It's amazing how quickly old folks like me can learn social media, etc. and the new culture of content rules through just playing with other folks and learning by doing. When older colleagues say it's not done that way, ask "why?" Challenge them (nicely). This will either break down the barriers to unconstructive advice or you'll learn the subtleties of advocacy and influence. When someone says these older librarians don't have the technology skills you need, offer to teach them. Remind them that you didn't have it and had to learn through play with friends and by doing. Ask them what they can teach you in exchange.

When someone suggests that a job opening really requires far too many years of experience, ask them "why?" Are they unprepared to experience the great gift of coaching new professionals and learning from them in return. If we want to sustain our libraries and profession we need to diversify the base of participants.

20. Iteration is everything.

In this new web-enabled (web-dominated) world of information service and delivery, we are mostly dealing with technologies that are still in grade school (less than ten years old) and many of the major players range from pre-school to primary grade age. We just are not going to get it permanently right with a few development cycles. We are in a state of continuous development state and this will likely last for many years if not forever. Indeed the invention of the book took many centuries to standardize on what we consider the so-called intuitive codex format today! So, we must focus on continuous iterative development of our interfaces, websites, content and services and, every once in awhile, we have to be ready for that forklift upgrade. Management is the one challenged by this since they must decide when (and when they can afford) to invest in a transformational upgrade and not just a point upgrade. It seems that every five to seven years you need to rebuild and take advantage of emerging standards and new technology innovations. We're seeing this with the cloud initiatives in libraries today. But, during that period until the next big thing comes along, we tweak and adjust and add new features as we iterate to achieve the improvements we need. Understand where your ideas fit in this curve.

21. Good not Perfect

Closely related to the last point, this is one that many of us have difficulty dealing with. We are after all a profession that covets the perfect catalogue record, believes that we can organize all of the world's knowledge for universal access AND we sit at desks offering to answer all comers' questions. Pretty nervy! It is a challenge for us to know when to release new products and service, when to decide that something is done, finished, and complete. These are our babies and no one wants to see their baby criticized! Perfection as an attitude gets in the way of decisions to release. When our stock in trade was mostly uncorrectable hard copy, this served us well. Now that we spend so much time in designing malleable interfaces, web products and content that is correctable and improvable on the fly, we need to decide when good enough is good enough. A valued manager used to quote this "Good Not Perfect" aphorism in so many meetings that we bought her a t-shirt. It broke the perfectionist mindset logjam so often and we all benefited from the real learning derived from working with the real product instead of the product in our mind's eye. Ask yourself how comfortable you are with continuous change and then how comfortable your organization or boss is with it. Comfort with ambiguity is a 21st Century skill. One simple sign of this for diagnostic purposes is how often your website changes or redesigns. How many people are encouraged (not allowed) to contribute content? Are there gateways or gatekeepers?

22. It's not the number of steps that cause delays in development - it's the space between the steps.

Have you ever been frustrated with how long it takes to accomplish projects? Of course you have. I have noticed that it's not the number of steps in your project plan that determines how long the project takes. It's when you take a breather between every step that causes delays. Now I am not saying that rushing is good but good project management minimizes the space between the steps and stays focused on achieving the milestones and the ultimate goal. I know that many websites and management processes benefit from regularly scheduled updates and improvements. Others seem to stay static and fossilized for years until they require complete removal and rebuilding. By sticking to a pattern of innovation and improvement things can stay dynamic and engaging. Good project management skills build trust and credibility. Many design and development shops use tried and true processes like two week developer sprints using Scrum and Agile methods. Learning these through e-learning or PD courses is a good choice.

23. Freeze and Go!

The right metaphor for much organizational or electronic development is seasonal change - not revolution or evolution. With services delivered by humans we can adjust and adapt as we see changes. Technology driven products and services are a different matter. Products are usually released in a somewhat fixed state. Changing them too often confuses the user but changing them not often enough causes them to risk stagnation or even fossilization. Choosing the correct cycle is an art. If you do something revolutionary, it is often called "ahead of its time" in retrospect, but often doesn't achieve enough acceptance in the present, and the evolutionary approach can be death by a thousand cuts to mid-level managers, sysadmins and users everywhere. Therefore, I like the seasonal metaphor where changes are collected and released on a simple schedule (quarterly, semi-annual, etc.). This requires some rigour in the process where the release is defined and the specification is respected so that the release can be frozen, tested and released. Then the development team can "go!" - move on to the next step. I have seen too many websites and content projects risk failure through random tinkering, second guessing and poor management of good ideas for improvement. A valued friend labels this 'creeping incrementalism'. Don't let this happen to you. If you see yourself as an innovative team member and as an idea person, learn to control the implementation but not the idea storming.

24. Prefer action over study.

If you or your team is studying something to death - remember that death was not the original goal! I have been in libraries where their systems folks in the host institution were studying whether to upgrade from Windows 95 to 98 in 2005! Scary! You see studies today about cloud initiatives that take too long and delay the savings. Although we have a great core competency in research and study, we must know when to fish or cut bait. In risk-averse cultures this is

particularly difficult. What needs to be learned and understood is that delay is as big a risk, as poorly considered action. Pilots and good process reduce your risk (and provide learning opportunities too). This philosophy is closely related to the one where an enterprise values its conservative culture and gradually declines due to its lack of adaptation to modern expectations. In risk-averse organizations position your ideas as tests and pilots to manage the risk, learn process, build endorsement, understand the communication and engagement envelope, and get it started in a way that doesn't threaten the whole organization.

Brainstorm, Mock-Up, Build, Alpha, Rebuild, Beta, Pilot, Test, Launch, Evaluate, Re-Do. And there's the process. It's pretty simple and many make the mistake of trying to skip a step. I've rarely seen a skipped step that didn't cause problems later. Each step can be quite small and contained. You don't need to bet the organization's future on a single initiative – writ large in the strategic plan. You do need to actively seek to have many projects at different stages of development in your funnel. That way you have built innovation processes into the DNA of your culture. By building teams focused on a few key initiatives – for example virtual reference, repositories, experience portals, and learning commons – you can focus attention and run several projects in parallel. This starts to create excitement and a practical image of action over study.

25. Remember the rule of six (6) in usability testing.

You get very diminishing returns after asking the same question of like people. Sometimes we think that we can reduce the risk from the implementation of our innovative product features and functions by testing it with hundreds of users or more. Some research (and personal experience) leads me to believe that that this volume of testing just increases your costs and delays delivery. I also see a tendency in libraries to consult and confer too much over too wide a span and diversity of users. For example, if you've designed a website for teen cardholders in your community to podcast their personal book reviews, then you likely only need to test it with 6 teens in your community to find out enough to iterate an improved version to test again. This technique will improve your product faster and you'll learn more. You'll also get closer to your target market's needs and values when you work with them personally rather than reviewing hundreds of pages of click reports! For example if you add a blog or a new library calendar to your library portal, test it with six people and integrate the learning from their experiences into your next iteration.

26. Remember the 15% rule.

Humans have extreme difficulty in actually seeing a comparative difference of less than 15%. I once read that research shows that when we see the light from 100 candles, we don't see a difference in brightness until 115 candles are lit. Interesting - I understand that the same thing is true of sound volume, colour variation, and other matters of human perception. Indeed, in job evaluation systems, job bands are not considered sufficiently different until there is a 12.5-15% difference in the job's points. So, what I have learned here is that

innovation needs to be sufficiently different from what was there before for humans (users) to see the difference. Some people think that making 100 things 2% better will make a perceptible difference. This isn't likely true and for our purposes we should probably attempt to make a much smaller group of initiatives 15% or more better. I also think that this is why single small introductions of new features on library portals are often missed or ignored until they're pointed out. They're not sufficiently different to be perceived and noticed. Therefore, it might be better to make grander changes to bring attention to new services and products in our virtual space. It also helps to explain why library leadership tries to focus on a smaller range of initiatives in each quarterly/annual cycle.

27. Use the 70/30 rule.

"I agree with 70% of the plan and can live with the other 30%." That's the key to consensus decision-making. Lord knows the time wasted trying to achieve an impossible 100% agreement to all points and ideas. If you can lead your team to agree to this principle, you have made a major step forward in breaking the logjam of unmade decisions in 'almost' complete projects. Of course, major stumbling blocks that some team members can't agree on must be worked through. Just don't let the minor ones hold up progress. Remember, the iteration rule – There' always another season to make changes based on real user experiences. This also applies to being a good team player which means that you're as good a follower as you are a team member. When you're the team leader, know when to actually decide. Don't keep revisiting when consensus is there.

28. Remember the old 80/20 rule standby.

No matter how few or how many users you have 80% of your usage / revenue / statistics, etc. will come from 20% of your users. If you remove 80% of your users who aren't delivering good user numbers, you'll still be getting 80% of your use from 20% of your users. Don't let some spreadsheet demon lure you into this productivity trap. In that 80% of users, who are not using your product or service a lot, are your non-users but also, importantly, your future or emerging new users, users who are still getting comfortable with the product or service, users from other underserved demographics where you'll discover new products and services to create, and users who are just at a different point in the adoption curve. If you want to grow you have to be a big tent to find all of your future users. If you diagnose too soon in the product cycle you kill good initiatives. If we only surveyed folks who came into the physical library, how can we be sure we're meeting the needs of our virtual users? Learn how to use statistics and measurements for insight and direction planning rather than merely decisions and counting effort.

29. Remember the 90/10 rule.

It's true enough that 90% of your costs in both time and money are in implementation, not development. It's a crying shame but it's true. Never underestimate the amount of time and effort that will be required after you have

given birth to your baby product or service. Just like human babies they require a lot of effort, expense, care and feeding, training and support to bring them up to their full potential. And like kids, be patient, they're marvelous when they're all grown up! Then again, they also require coaching and guidance as they develop.

30. Get out of *your* box!

It is unlikely that you are the alpha user profile. Understand that. I know that as a librarian I am pretty limited in my ability to really connect with the challenges faced by newbie library, web or database searchers, the younger generation, seniors, or anyone who's different from me and my experience. I am not saying that I can't overcome this, but I have to be explicitly aware that my training, biases and life experiences have forever changed me and my perceptions of the information world and society. It also means that when I am designing services for seniors, kids, teens, challenged communities, the differently-abled, or even other professions like lawyers or engineers, I have to keep in mind that I need to be aware and prioritize their needs and competencies over my own. I find that it pays to remind myself that I am not trying to create products and services for mini-librarians and that this is a poor goal in the first place. I need to understand the user's context and needs and not project my own them. For instance, it is likely that the end-user doesn't actually want 'information' but, more likely, wants to be informed, learn, be entertained, taught and/or transformed in some manner. Libraries are great environments for that. Don't be that librarian who designs things for your profile rather than the target users. Indeed, users don't need repairing; they need support and good design.

31. "Productize"

Be able to physically point at your product or service. It's a problem that so many library products and services are so intangible. Until we can name them and point to them as if they were a tangible service or product, they will be undervalued and underappreciated by our users. It will also be difficult for our supporters to articulate what it is that truly makes their library experience transformational. For instance, branding your service and tying your name and institution to the brand is essential. Look at how much more successful library OPACs and websites for teens and kids are when they are associated with a strong branding program and marketing plan. I love the special branding some libraries have put on their catalogues and websites. Also, learn how much more articulate we are about our traditional services when a new element arrives. For example, traditional reference work now describes itself much better after new virtual services were introduced. It focused the mind on what value was being delivered and the individual strengths of face-to-face and virtual reference services. The Amazon.com book suggestion features challenged reader advisory services to stretch and the impact of Google on the positioning of professional database searching needs no illustration.

One weakness in library land is that we have a culture of craft – hand knitting every product and too often not moving these into industrial frameworks where they are scalable on a system wide or profession wide scale. Crafts are wonderful but they won't solve the problems of libraries if we don't scale our value, effectiveness and efficiency to be everywhere.

As an aside, I believe that your product description should talk about the benefits. Can you imagine Chanel No. 5 describing itself as smelly yellow liquid? That's what you do when you describe libraries as books and information. Use verbs that show action not nouns. For example, ALA produces READ posters not BOOK posters.

32. You can't step in the same river twice.

This is ancient Confucian wisdom. It means, in our context, that our knowledge of new information or technology developments means that we probably cannot see the potential pitfalls or even its great potential. I remember when AltaVista was first introduced and many colleagues said that this couldn't be the future of searching. After all, it had no fields, no true Boolean, and it didn't allow the use of set searching! How could this be the future of online searching? Then along came relevancy ranking driven by the search engine's algorithm – again pooh-poohed by my colleagues (and me for a while). Can you point to someone's beautiful baby and criticize her as being a lousy accountant? Keep yourself open to the movement of the river – it's always changing and the river is strong. In the battle of the river and the rock, the river wins. Just look deep into the Grand Canyon and see the power of steady progress. Today we must invent a future for libraries that exists in a world of users who are literally changed in their perception of information use and the role of technology. You may be a great advocate for your ideas but can you see the pitfalls too?

33. Remember FABS

Understand the differences between features, functions and benefits. It's easy to design hundreds of features and functions into a product or service. It is hard to know which ones are the most important to each user. The true skill is in knowing what the benefit of each is. Who is deriving the benefit: the end user?; administration?; the intermediary?; the vendor? Exactly who derives the ultimate benefit helps you decide who wants your product or service. If it doesn't meet someone's true need, then seriously question whether it's worth doing. It should also meet the need of your priority target user. Then you must market and sell the benefits to your users – not the features and functions. Indeed, many library products have so many features that they are too confusing to end-users. Imagine an ATM at the bank that was marketed as buttons that told you your bank balance - instead of as a convenience! How many end user features in libraries more often meet the institution's needs for administration, data collection, authentication, etc.?

34. Don't assume - TEST.

You may believe that you understand your customer. You may even have been a customer or 'ordinary' person or 'normal' user in a past life. You may think that you know what the user will do in nearly every situation. Don't believe it. There is nothing more humbling than discovering the infinite variety of user paths and behaviors and thinking patterns out there in the real world. It's a bowl of gourmet jellybeans out there with a few M&M's thrown in for good measure! Chant this mantra – I will know my assumptions, I will test my assumptions, I will test my assumptions. It's better to be humbled in your beta test than embarrassed in the marketplace. As a corollary, make sure you're testing with real users, not just friends-of-the-house, users who walk-in versus virtual users, or users who don't match the target. And don't forget non-users!

35. Observe

Don't just ask your clients what they do, will do or want. OBSERVE them. It has been my observation that users can't, won't or don't tell you what they are really doing online or on the web. When I watch them I see all sorts of user behaviors that are interesting and useful. Some theorists claim that retrospective coherence (or the ability to make sense of something after the fact) causes this contradiction. Also, users just can't imagine how much better something can be. They only want to satisfy a need and get frustrated when there are barriers to that satisfaction. By watching their real behaviours (and sometimes using keystroke trackers or cams) we see where that frustration occurs and can start to think more creatively about ways to improve that service, website or search experience. Try to see what's really happening and not what you think it occurring. There's a difference.

36. Have a vision and dream BIG!

Try to be future focused. We know that we can't build the future without you and your ideas and energy. I have seen the power of vision in every workplace I have been employed in. When it is absent the workplace is missing something and verges on the horrible. When a shared vision is present we have achieved great things. When the vision doesn't have enough stretch in it, things seem mediocre. Think back to great work environments you've worked in or great leaders you've worked for and you'll usually find there were some great and compelling visions at work there. And for those who don't dream big and have a vision, they're doomed to an endless series of the present. I hope they love the way things are.

37. Ask everyone, including your management team, the three magic questions:

- What keeps you awake at night?
- If you could solve only one problem at work, what would it be?
- If you could change one thing and one thing only, what would it be?

I have discovered that these questions are truly magic. They start conversations with users rather than delivering simple answers. They're open-ended instead of

closed-ended, yes or no answer questions. Just set the context and ask away. I have used these questions with primary school kids, titans of industry like Bill Gates, librarians, IT managers and cabinet ministers. These questions work every time to delve deeply into our users' needs and personal goals. When we are armed with that knowledge then our libraries are unstoppable. (As an aside, I often hear financing issues like 'more budget'. Ask what is being done innovatively and strategically to address the issue and how can you help. If it doesn't have new ways of addressing the issue, it's not bothering them enough. If they're doing the same old things and expecting different results . . .!) Ask 'why' questions to get to the center of the user's needs.

The questions above get into the psyche of your people, their real needs.

38. Never underestimate the customer.

Our customers (users, clients, learners, students, faculty, cardholders, members, et al) come with an infinite range of skills and abilities. While we may strive for simple we have to avoid being simplistic. Never shoot to please the lowest common denominator – or necessarily the broadest, vanilla group. That strategy ensures that you'll displease the widest range of users. For example, some love the spare Google interface with loads of white space. It is clean and spare. It also forces users to find the information density and deeper information they need elsewhere. The most popular websites our users use (CNN, CBC, NYT, USA Today, etc.) are definitely denser and people survive fine. Users have demonstrated an amazing elasticity to adapt complex solutions to their information and life problems. We can't force too much at them at once, but we shouldn't ascribe this learning curve to an inability to adapt – it just takes time. The public is ready for more density and libraries definitely have a complex service proposition.

### 39. Seek the *real* customer

This is harder than it sounds. There are always important stakeholders in any product. For example, a simple website for students can involve teachers, administrators, IT folks, librarians, content creators, parents, curriculum developers, vendors, and, just by the way, the kid. Whose needs must absolutely be met and whose needs take second seat? It's a very hard question and I've seen development teams have serious debates arguing for one focus over another. Either way, make sure you meet the needs of the real end-user. Many a product has failed by meeting the needs of the wrong population. (Just ask yourself the simple question for each feature and function – Who cares? Perhaps a simple example – If I add DRM to this product: Who cares? The end-user?; Administrators?; The content provider?; Hmmm.) Does your idea or innovation need to be optimized for the librarian, professor or curriculum leader who is actually building the content or the learner?

40. Respect diversity

There's an enormous amount of diversity out there and it is not just traditional diversity around income, gender, sexual orientation, race, culture, ethnicity or language. Of particular interest to information professionals (and to me) is diversity of information literacy skills, learning styles and multiple intelligences. There is a significant body of research in the education and library sciences that should be understood here. That's where the research is being done about understanding persons and not just technology. With respect to the human-computer interface, we have more control on the computer side. I have found that spending time learning from the works of Bloom, Gardner and Piaget in the fields of learning and intelligence pays off richly in better understanding of user behaviors.

41. Understand the adoption curve.

I love the adoption curve. It explains so much about why certain people are not as comfortable as others with innovation and change but get comfortable at their preferred stage. Yet everyone (or nearly everyone) eventually adapts to changes in our world. Basically new innovations need to attract the use and attention of 15% of your target group before they break the overall inertia of the entire market. Bridging the chasm between the early adopters and the greater majority is a major deal.
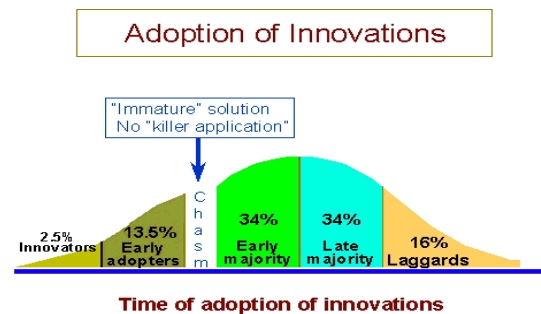
I have found that in the early phases of a new or innovative product or service that the opinions of early adopters are most useful. As the product progresses though its lifecycle the reactions and opinions of later adopters become increasingly important. Likewise, the opinions of folks who have a predilection to late adoption offer little substantive or actionable advice on transformational or leading edge technologies. We can easily track innovators through early adopters and early through late majority in the adoption of Internet access and websites through libraries. On the other hand, people who display fan-boy or fan-girl behaviours may be too blinded to overzealous to listen well and manage a transition effectively.

42. Do research for yourself too.

Set up alerts on your hot issues and hot technologies. Your research skills are not just for your clients – use them in your own cause. Read the blogs in your field and have a trusted circle of bloggers who alert you to cool ideas, changes in

our field and websites worth a look (ensure your RSS feeds are well curated). Make sure to attend the keynotes and trends sessions at conferences and not just the core sessions in your area of expertise. Keep your mind open to the viral effects of these new information grapevines. Just look at the success of such technologies as RSS, blogs, tweets, social media, wikis, etc., that was achieved with little or no formal advertising. So many exciting things are happening now and will continue to generate opportunities.

43. Bring management on side first

Then add customers and users, BEFORE you launch. This is a truism in every book about innovation and product management. Yet it is shocking how often it's ignored. Without your management on side, understanding the goals, product and overall agenda, you risk failure. They are a key stakeholder and can certainly drive a stake through the heart of your project. Keep them in the loop, continuously. My learning has been that management hates surprises more than anything else, avoid surprising them.

44. Feedback is a gift

Like that wedding gift from Aunt Sally, you can keep it, display it, return it, or hide it in the closet. It's your choice. Don't overvalue one piece of out-of-context feedback or let it loom out of perspective and balance. Avoid lasting emotional responses to single instances of both negative and positive feedback. Feedback is best digested in the aggregate rather than in small doses. Squeaky wheels are fine and need to be oiled. But if it's the engine that needs attention, then that well-oiled wheel is just a distraction. Feedback shouldn't be cause for stomach-wrenching stress. You are in control of how it can be dealt with (good or constructive or bad) and need to hear and accept this gift from your stakeholders. Do you have feedback mechanisms on your website? Do you have feedback mechanisms for yourself and your plans (personal and professional)?

45. Measure - don't just count:

Decision-makers CANNOT interpret your statistics well. They either don't have enough background or just don't have the time to invest. You have to do it for them. Don't let your data and statistics stand alone in a field lacking context, insight and interpretation. Use stories and develop the ability to create perfect visuals (bar charts, pie charts, pictures, graphs and maps) that communicate difficult financial and statistical information effectively to decision-makers. This is a great skill. Visual display is a key skill to managing the communication of insights in barrels of data.

46. Sacrifice

Every organization has thousands of ideas that are worthy of consideration. Sadly, no organization can do them all, and if they try they'll fail at everything. That's the tough part. When you have 100 good ideas to choose from the critical skill isn't choosing 5 but *sacrificing* 95. Learn the skill of temporary sacrifice. You can store your good ideas in an idea parking lot and bring them forward into

the strategic planning process as projects are completed and new priorities are set. If you don't focus and choose to limit your energy and the energy of your teams for achieving success on those that will deliver the most value to your enterprise and users, then you are choosing mediocrity.

47. Cheap is expensive
Especially in the long run - think of cheap products as pilots for the real implementation. This seems obvious but I am always shocked by the needless nickel and diming that limits the success of a project. Good budgeting and management are truly necessary, but financing success is different and having a value system that sets doing it right as a priority rather than doing it cheap as a best practice. Every real project should recognize the real costs in: conversions, customization, user adoption, marketing, introduction and launch and client support, etc. As a corollary please value your time in dollars realistically. It's sad when we value our own time and effort at zero cost in business cases.

48. Build for the future
Too often projects that are planned for 18-36 months naively assume that things will stay the same technologically. Remember the lessons of the past where the things mutated quickly - DOS became Windows; diskettes became CD-ROMs; Netscape begat MSIE which begat Firefox & Chrome; online dial-up became web broadband; servers became the cloud, etc. You can't be certain of the future but you can't wait for total stability either. That won't happen and that's the permanent state of ambiguity. Dealing with ambiguity is a key competency in change management and introducing innovation.

49. Learn from Best AND *Bad* Practices
I admire those who can craft and communicate best practices. I also find it difficult to cull from these best practices exactly what caused the 'successes'. However, when I hear about a worst practice I seem to learn quickly and see the moral of the story really fast - interesting that. Here is a list of the lucky seven themes of bad practices in introducing innovation in new products:
- Multiple, ambiguous objectives
- Different functional objectives
- Focus on current customers and confusion about future target customers
- Narrow engineering focus on elegant solutions and leisurely attitude to time
- Team doesn't own project and blame is shifted
- Narrow specialists in functional chimneys
- Unclear direction, no one in charge, accountability limited, inconsistent or invisible executive support

50. No mistake is ever final.
One of my better bosses had this phrase framed on the wall of her office. She said she was going to get it done in needlepoint one day. We were part of a

skunkworks that was tasked with re-technologizing a major international corporation as well as introducing transformational change into a huge market and changing the overall culture of companies involved. No small task. Not only did we make many mistakes but we learned from them. If we weren't making mistakes we weren't trying hard enough. Albeit, we tried to limit the exposure of our experiments, but like learning to skate, if you're not falling down, you're just not learning well enough. Her sign "No mistake is ever final" encourages us to try just that little bit harder to achieve greatness because we knew we had her support. If you want to change things for the better, you have to be a change agent and that means you have to be more comfortable with making mistakes and dealing with them effectively – and learning all the time.

51. Have some fun!

We are often too serious. Our work is serious and our impact on our communities is enormous! However, I don't believe that serious means professional and it gets in the way of progress and teamwork when it is overly evident. Working creatively, trying new things and being innovative are fun. Take the time to recognize that and live your life to the fullest. Celebrate your successes and your team's work. Use humour. Champion your library's achievements! Reward your colleagues when they succeed. Don't ever get so heads-down that you can't see the big picture. It's a wonderful world.

I hope you have found my old insights useful. I think that these could form the basis for a good discussion between staff and library managers / leaders. I also know that even though I can write these down in the hope that they're helpful to librarians who are in earlier stages of their career adventure; I also know that they're learning from experience and not from someone telling you. As I said at the beginning, not every tip is guaranteed to work every time or in every situation. It's always good to keep talking, debating and working together to move our organizations and our communities forward.

Be calm and carry on.

Stephen