

Priority Team 9: Innovation without Burnout 2005-06 Year End Report to LMT

Introduction

For the past twelve months, members of the #9 team have read about, thought about and discussed how we can help the individuals and the organization that we care about engage in their work tasks in a more effective and healthy way, to remain innovative and agile, without compromising equilibrium and enthusiasm. At many points we have had more questions than answers yet we have learned a great deal. Collectively, the team has read over 75 relevant books and articles. We learned from those who are forging the path of innovation and well-being firsthand both outside of Cornell and inside CUL. Externally we learned from Cornell faculty and from innovators at other institutions. Within CUL, we listened to the comments of approximately 100 employees through a variety of methods. (A resource binder with summary reports and redacted comments from CUL employees will be provided to each LMT member.) This report synthesizes our understanding of the connections between innovation and burnout and makes recommendations for next steps. The team believes we have seen the start of the road toward innovation and engagement, and learned the markers that will help us find our way as we go. We hope that our work to date will inspire you to continue to build and broaden this path. This report is an invitation to join us on this journey of discovery. Like all journeys, this one begins in the imagination.

An Invitation to Dream: The future of Innovation and Engagement at CUL

Imagine a CUL community where every day, CUL employees— at every level, in every position, in every department, at every library unit - are engaged in tasks that suit their aptitudes and skill sets. We are continuously learning and freely sharing what we know with each other. CUL is internationally renowned for our innovations and we are an employer of choice for the best and brightest knowledge workers. We host visitors from around the world who come to observe us and to marvel at our success. Our open secret is that years ago, we cultivated a deep and abiding appreciation for what is possible when we work with each other and with forces that shape our organization to create the future we have imagined.

It was unsettling to let go of our old identities, our need for control and certainty, but we did. Our experience with organizational change over the years has led us to cultivate an expertise for managing the process of transformational change. Library employees persevered, and as we practiced remaining open and curious, creativity and innovation began to replace our worry and stress. Today we are even more successful and more relaxed. We're optimistic and excited about the future. We fear constraints less, and are more willing to engage in challenges.

Our organizational structure looks and feels very different today. As we learned more effective ways to work together, we began to shed some of the organizational

structures that were holding us back. Today, we resemble a web of connections. Everyone is attentive to the organizational mission, and vital information needed to stay on the cutting edge is easily discovered, communicated, and acted upon. We know where we want to go, and our efforts are moving us closer to a shared vision.

Innovation at CUL: Today's Reality

Successes

As Michelle Paolillo writes in a preliminary report on the internal data gathering, "CUL is far from a homogenous place. As we evolve from "what we have been" to "what we will become" it is important to realize that different parts of the organization, and even different people within units, evolve on different timetables." During the past year, the #9 team observed some examples of clear success in bringing innovations forward from throughout the system. We saw staff who are engaged and passionate about their work, who take pride in their results, and are intrinsically motivated to improve processes. We found many innovators who have been at CUL for over a decade. We discovered innovations, perceived by many as overnight successes that had one or more aborted attempts that informed the later success. We witnessed the excitement and appreciation generated when an innovation is perceived, by all involved, to be central to the Library's mission and to serve a substantial need. We observed the positive outcomes for the library that resulted from supervisors who provide time and money for ongoing training for staff to develop and broaden their skill sets. We learned how supervisors who effectively protected innovators from "undesirable" forces (mediate between competing projects, provide flexible scheduling, etc.) facilitated successful innovations. We learned how leaders who budgeted time to listen and respond to the needs of "resistors" produced viable innovations. Perhaps most fundamental of all, we heard many narratives attesting to the spontaneous involvement, responsibility and perseverance that many staff apply to the projects they undertake, and the great loyalty that they have for CUL.

Missed Opportunities

Our interviews also revealed other moments in which we (CUL) missed significant opportunities to move toward innovation without burnout.

Three contributing factors to CUL's missed opportunities were noted:

1. Ineffective or non-existent task relief (allowing employees to balance the needs of the project with other duties.
2. The lack of praise and/or encouragement for an innovative project.
3. Incomplete communication between project sponsor and implementation staff regarding the purpose of the project, the impact of the project on staff and current services, or alternative strategies for meeting the project's objectives.

We learned of the negative impact on morale that resulted when the mutual flow of information between administrators, project leaders and individual contributors was obstructed. We heard staff express their lack of understanding of the vision for their project. We witnessed the natural consequences of projects that are perceived to serve political needs rather than users' needs.

As we interviewed project leaders and team members separately, we discovered how, in the absence of information, staff at all levels fill the silences with their worst fears. We heard from staff who felt they had vital information to contribute to the decision making process, but perceived there was no avenue for them to offer these contributions. We heard project managers bemoan the lack of investment from key players. We saw how miscommunication can stymie progress on a project, limit its effectiveness, or send a project underground. We discovered "secret" innovators who had a passion to solve a particular problem and who kept their efforts hidden from their supervisors so that they could continue working on solving the issues that truly motivate and engaged them.

In other instances, we heard of projects that continue past their usefulness, and projects that did not have adequate resources to maintain the innovation as an on-going service. And in many places we learned that innovators find it difficult to identify the right audience with whom to share their innovation successes. For that reason, it should not be surprising that we found evidence of duplicated efforts to address similar issues.

Continuing challenges to be addressed

Our interviews revealed that many at CUL perceive the diversity of and loose affiliations among libraries to be an advantage in responding quickly to emerging local needs. Yet we also learned that, at times, our structure limits our ability to effectively transfer solutions from one part of the system to another. We also discovered a host of "invisible" priorities at the department or unit library that are perceived to be in competition for time, money, and labor with priorities and directives from central administration. These factors will be with us for the foreseeable future.

In addition to the structural barriers, we also discovered that emotional barriers figure prominently in barring the effective flow of communication vital to any collaborative undertaking. These obstacles stem from the way a number of employees perceive their working environment. Common obstacles, identified by CUL staff and substantiated by the literature, that limit innovation and contribute to burnout are listed below:

- Many staff feel they do not understand senior management's vision for the future.
- Employees find it difficult to focus when there are so many competing priorities.
- Many experience a lack of time - to focus, to prioritize, to reflect and to learn.

- Some staff express a lack of clarity about constraints, boundaries, and criteria for success
- Others note that there are negative consequences for saying “no.”
- Others are afraid to take risk because they perceived negative consequences for failing.
- Some managers do not trust their employees’ skills and competencies.
- Some employees experience a lack of support and encouragement for taking risks, and report a lack of freedom and authority to take action.
- A number of interviewees feel that management did not appreciate their efforts.

Workplace stressors – such as those listed above - can overload an individual’s capacity to adapt successfully and may eventually result in burnout - i.e. the experience of long-term exhaustion and diminished interest, usually experienced immediately after an extended period of overwork. Addressing the issue of burnout at the organizational level is particularly challenging because what may be stressful to one person may be exciting and challenging to another. Also, the same event can be distressful at one time and stimulating or non-stressful at another. These varying conditions depend upon the individual’s perception of the situation. How a person responds to stressful situations depends upon many variables such as the environment, the magnitude of the stressor, what has gone before, the person’s self-perceived ability to handle the stressor, etc. Strangely enough, research indicates that burnout usually affects the most able individuals—those who are the most competent and committed, those who feel the most strongly about the value of what they do and want to do their best. While there are no easy answers, understanding and managing stress during times of change is necessary for sustainable innovation.

As we create strategies to effectively surface and address individual and unit-level concerns in ways that also serve CUL-wide needs, the creativity and innovation that currently exists in the system can be leveraged for even greater success. Additionally, we will be better positioned to attract and retain a talented workforce. By accepting and appropriately addressing these perceptions and concerns, we can gain the essential momentum and cohesion needed to move CUL forward. This is what is meant by “working *with* each other and *with* the forces that shape our organization.”

Moving Forward

Enhancing innovation and engagement takes ***imagination, focus and perseverance*** by employees at all levels of our organization. This work requires a multi-faceted approach and a long-term commitment. Research indicates that transformational change at the organizational level requires a critical mass to negate old behaviors. There is no quick fix or magic bullet and typically this type of change takes 5

years or more years. ***Our challenge is to develop a shared vision, values, and best practices that provide cohesion and purpose to individual employee efforts.***

A future of innovation without burnout may be closer than it seems. This change will not require a massive or immediate overhaul of the current state. Rather, the change we seek will come as individual employees, managers, and administrators experiment with and share their perceptions of the *processes* that contributes to their success. As Margaret Mead reminds us, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has. “

Where to begin:

Leaders in organizations seeking stability and security in a dynamic environment emphasize the organization's vision and values over specific strategies. Vision and values provide the destination while the various strategies serve as different routes to the destination. Linking the vision with the strategies helps reduce anxiety and stress by showing employees that while their tasks and the focus of their work will inevitably change, these changes need not place their employment in jeopardy. With individuals - at all levels - consciously moving toward the same destination, the outcome is one of stability rather than chaos and confusion. Focusing on the vision encourages an understanding of the need to change routes when barriers obstruct the path. The course adjustments are taken in stride because we have not lost sight of where we are going.

Clear and frequently articulated organizational values support individual efforts in a similar way. When we are clear about what we value as an organization, individuals can monitor and make adjustments to their day-to-day strategies. The values bind our individual effort into a cohesive whole. Decisions and actions become transparent and it's easier to self-manage and adjust behavior. The values help us determine which strategies are moving us in the direction of our vision, which ones lead to dead ends, and which ones point us in the wrong direction. A vision and shared values anchor the search for easy, interesting and rewarding strategies for individuals at all levels to offer ideas, solve problems and improve services.

What to look for - helpful behaviors and attributes

“Knowledge worker,” a term coined by Peter Drucker, a management theorist, in 1959, is one who works primarily with information or one who develops and uses knowledge in the workplace. The literature on knowledge workers and our own experience at CUL tells us that employees in our environment do their best work when they are empowered to use their strengths (intellect, skills, and networks of colleagues) to solve issues that matter the most to them. The best of our employees can often work on many projects at the same time; they know how to allocate their time; and they can multiply the results of their efforts through emotional intelligence and building trusting relationships.

Individuals who will thrive in an innovative and engaged environment display certain traits and attributes. These traits include:

Curiosity: Interviewees and literature on innovation frequently mention curiosity as a fundamental ingredient of innovation and engagement. The essence of innovation is the ability to see things differently. As we become more comfortable with ambiguity, more relaxed about not having all the answers, more comfortable with experimenting with different strategies, our creative impulses can surface.

Independence: Curiosity leads to independence. When we allow our curiosity to lead us, we must reason through to our conclusions ourselves. Confident in our understanding of the vision and values, we are positioned to act independently within our understanding of the vision and values of the organization.

Accountability: Freedom to choose requires responsibility for one's choices. Accountability is not the same thing as accepting blame; accountability means taking responsibility for one's growth and development and contribution within the context of the organization. The process requires cycles of action and reflection that move us closer to our vision.

Relationship building:

- Knows how to identify the agenda of others
- Knows how to share one's own agenda in respectful ways
- Knows how to combine multiple agendas to create win/win solutions.

As CUL employees feel connected through a common vision and values, they will begin to see the benefits of sharing their unique networks of collaborators and resources with others throughout the system. Freely sharing information, which is used to meet mutual needs, helps to build the trusting relationships essential to innovation and engagement.

Persistence: Without persistence the aforementioned attributes would not sustain us. Persistence is not ceaseless striving. Persistence requires the ability to do – at any given moment – what is necessary to move toward the vision. Sometimes that means keeping at a problem until it yields. Sometimes that means ceasing action in order to reflect and replenish our individual and collective resources.

Optimism: Optimists see problems as temporary, specific and external. Road blocks are interpreted as opportunities to sharpen the vision or to rethink a particular strategy. As we cultivate our optimism, our frustrations will give way to creative breakthroughs.

There is ample evidence of individuals (employees and managers) throughout CUL who are exhibiting these desirable traits. Our challenge is to highlight, promote and encourage these behaviors so that they appear more broadly and more often throughout the system. Everyone in an agile organization has responsibility for self development, yet managers have a greater responsibility. Managers must also be role models; they must coach, mentor, encourage, or take other steps necessary to help

others to adopt more useful behaviors. Specifically, managers are responsible for the overall climate of their units, for providing learning opportunities for individuals, developing and maintaining effective relationships among departments, and making sound hiring decisions.

Fortunately these aforementioned characteristics are not only innate. They can be learned, although mastery requires conscious effort over time. In the next section some strategies for increasing these useful traits are suggested.

Suggestions for Next Steps

"If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put foundations under them." Henry David Thoreau

1. Develop the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities for innovation without burnout. The initial focus should be on strategic individuals (supervisors and informal leaders) within the CUL community.

Embedded in each of the bulleted skills listed below is an aspect of effective communication required to address the three contributing factors to our missed opportunities. While the skills we need can be learned, competency will require the will and persistence to practice these skills until they become second nature to us. In an environment of constant change all employees will need these skills to some degree; however, these skills are exceedingly important for managers.

- Crucial Conversations skills including how to share ideas respectfully and freely, how to listen without fear and how to work more collaboratively.
- Mentoring, coaching, setting and managing expectations, and managing change
- Creative problem solving skills
- Project management skills including planning for reflective learning and evaluation
- Optimism enhancement skills– through Seligman project and other initiatives
- Emotional intelligence skills including self awareness, self management, social awareness, and relationship management

2. Express appreciation to employees and colleagues often and in a variety of ways.

The rewards most library employees treasure come from the internal satisfaction of doing one's best on meaningful work. Reinforce employees' intrinsic satisfaction by showing appreciation for their efforts. There are many ways to show appreciation, depending upon the person and the context of the work. Of utmost importance is that the appreciation be timely and offered sincerely. Some of the more public ways to express appreciation is to provide:

- Opportunities for achievement

- Giving of challenging responsibility
- Opportunity for advancement
- Opportunity for growth in stature and peer recognition

3. Promote organizational learning by sponsoring a study of the recent Library Technical Services Integration.

One source of CUL's competitive advantage will come from our ability to effectively reorganize – time and again - in ways that maximize overall effectiveness. The technical services integration project is particularly interesting because of the magnitude of the project and because the implementation process challenges some of CUL's traditional organizational infrastructures. Reflecting upon and sharing lessons learned from this project will increase our capacity to continuously adapt and change our infrastructure as needed. At the same time, this reflection and sharing process can be used as a leadership development activity to expose high potential employees to the complexities and challenges of significant organizational change.

In addition, interviewing management and staff involved in the LTS integration will serve as an opportunity to express appreciation for employees' efforts, to demonstrate an interest in their opinions, to model optimism about our future and to encourage persistence in achieving our vision. The team has received direct feedback from many interviewees that they found the interview process helpful and regenerative, and many have thanked us sincerely for our interest.

4. Understand and describe successful models of collaboration based on feedback from CUL employees.

With every innovation project interview, we uncovered some aspect of working on CUL-wide projects that could be considered best practices. For example, we have learned some helpful “do's and don'ts” for creating team charges, identifying team members, and working with sponsors. Developing some examples of “CUL Best Practices” based upon the feedback we've receive is one way we can build upon what is working well.

5. *Build a Culture of Engagement*

The following strategies are examples of how to make the link between CUL's vision, values and our current strategies more transparent. Each expression of management's concern for and commitment to CUL employees enhances the trust necessary for innovation and engagement to flourish.

- Share broadly and often senior management's vision for the future. As strategies shift, explain how the new strategies move CUL closer that the vision. Visions are not lofty sentiments or inspiring phrases; they are practical tools. Building a shared vision of the future allows managers to align individual and unit actions.

- Host a CUL “Call to Engagement” with the aim of gaining input on senior management’s vision for the future and suggestions for strategies for achieving the vision.
- Experiment with different approaches to large group meetings in order to ensure maximum engagement. For example, consider decreasing the percentage of time allotted to the speaker and increasing the time allotted to interaction among participants.
- Offer more informal gatherings for staff from across the system to encourage collaboration, sharing and learning.
- Target middle managers and informal opinion leaders and “boundary spanners” (those whose easily cross CUL-unit boundaries) who can help promote a vision for the future, who will assist in reducing conflict and will facilitate the generation of a collective spirit of optimism and persistence as needed. Ensure these strategic employees have customized development plans to guarantee they remain role models for others.
- Set up a blog as an “Uncle Ezra”- type engagement tool for CUL, providing staff members a vehicle for airing concerns, asking for advice regarding the change process, and promoting personal development.

6. Benchmark Employee Morale

Select and implement an annual survey to measure worker satisfaction and engagement. Use this data as one measure of progress toward innovation without burnout, and solicit employees’ ideas for increasing levels of engagement and improving morale.

Summary:

Our future depends upon us, both individually and institutionally. The pressure that keeps us in the “doing” mode with little or no time for reflection and real thinking, certainly keeps us busy. But adding “busy” to “busy” simply begets “busier”. This approach eventually wears out staff, and erodes any sense of balance. From such a deficient perspective, new ideas and innovation often fail to take root, or start to take root, but wither and die for lack of sustained effort.

CUL is fortunate that we have examples even now of healthier workplace models. As we build upon our best practices, we will engage more of our energetic, skilled and dedicated staff. The positive momentum generated when strategies with the hallmarks of respect, honesty, collaboration, thoughtfulness and engagement are employed, will propel us toward an organizational culture that benefits individual employees, unit libraries and CUL. We see the fruits of this labor as innovation without burnout. As we learn to speak openly to one another about the core issues

that are of greatest concern to us, as we gain clarity in our vision for the future; as we tap into the deep passions inside each of us, we will create a future of innovation and engagement. We will be working *with* each other, and *with* the forces that shape our organization.