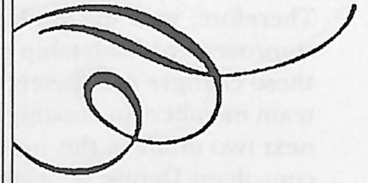


A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY DESTINATION

by Bill Bolte



“The Jeffersonville Township Public Library shall provide exemplary library services.”

What a concise and meaningful statement and one which would later become the adopted mission statement for the Jeffersonville Township Public Library.

Such succinctness was quite a contrast to what I had known throughout my years in management, as mission statements, along with related goals and objectives, were often quite lengthy in nature. In fact, a statement was more likely a paragraph. A mission statement might be the most complex paragraph imaginable, as were the multitude of goals and objectives which were supportive of the mission itself. [I believe vision statements were a more recent addition, especially when stated in the present tense.] All components of the planning process, however, required at least deep discussion by a number of people representative of the organization, management, and the people served. Planning process statements tended, or so they seemed to me, to incorporate into one sentence every idea and concept proposed by the planning group, so as to recognize everyone’s contribution to the thought process.

Not the case as taught by Sara Laughlin & Associates in the method of continuous improvement. Verbosity, “no;” brevity, “yes.”

Continuous improvement is a new method and system which may soon take the lead over what we traditionally called strategic planning or long range planning. Actually, it is likely all of the above, but much more. As Laughlin stated in 2001, the model for continuous improvement existed in the business and industrial community, but apparently not so in the public library world. She, along with partners at the time, Ray Wilson and Denise Shockley, set out to change that.

As one of the participating libraries in the second group of libraries accepted for the Continuous Improvement for Libraries training series, called “Getting Better Every Day,” in 2002, two other staff members and I decided to be involved in this learning experience.

One member was Kathy Rosga, manager of the Clarksville Branch Library; the second was Laura Bjornson, an assistant librarian in Youth Services.

Each of the eight sessions we attended over most of the year did make us realize that we not only could get better every day, but that getting better could make our library exemplary, and exemplary was exactly what our library staff determined our library services should be in the mission statement for the Jeffersonville Township Public Library.

As the workshop trainers introduced continuous improvement tools in an enjoyable way (such as the ball toss process) and involved us in methods of ranking options and in decision making, the intent was to see not only what we do, but how we could improve in a sequenced and consistent manner. Another discovery was that we should have fun while doing it!

A whole new mind set and vocabulary would replace the familiar terms associated with long range planning. Instead, the long range planning process became a system map, and our task to define a Constancy of Purpose and identify suppliers and inputs, customers and outputs. New terms such as values, key success factors, key processes, and feedback loops replaced the old terminology of goals, objectives, and activities.

From the moment we committed to continuous improvement, the term “Constancy of Purpose” replaced our all too stylistic term “long range plan.” Thinking in terms of Constancy of Purpose, more importance would now be given to determining who is the supplier and who is the customer, as well as what are the inputs and what are the outputs. From this point forward emphasis would be placed on providing leadership to a group for team-based consensus, rather than authoritarian decisions resulting from experiences and personal preferences.

The common excuse of time constraints and “I have too much work already which doesn’t get done as it is” gave way to feeling good about the outcome of each meeting and understanding that continuous improve-

ment can be done in small steps; it doesn't have to be a big leap to make an improvement. Once a person assumes the role as leader and begins to involve others, the framework is constructed for staff to be involved in cooperative decisions; thereby vesting each participant as a team member. Personally, I had to overcome my ingrained nature of assertiveness and being a task-oriented person who finds the democratic process too slow and challenging.

Since my participation in the monthly workshops and follow-up staff meetings, what has become most important to me is thinking differently as we seek to conceptualize and to look for process refinement, even if we do not do everything according to the rule and we don't remember all of the methods in achieving group consensus. When working in groups I have had to think as a diplomat and to analyze not just what is said and the manner in which someone says it, but to consider how what I say is perceived before saying it. I have to consciously be receptive as to how other people interact and how ideas are expressed in a group situation, whereas before, I had always worked better with a task I could do myself rather than a task which required group consensus.

Determined to make personal behavioral changes, to learn the tools and processes required, and to improve the way my library operated and presented itself to the public, I forged ahead to implement continuous improvement for the Jeffersonville Township Public Library. To increase the awareness level of the staff and to present an opportunity for all staff to understand the library's service philosophy, the library's Staff Institute Day was set on February 16, 2004, and the theme we chose was "Getting Better Every Day." No surprise! The theme was the same title given to the continuous improvement workshop series which Bjornson, Rosga, and I attended.

Denise Shockley, an associate with Sara Laughlin & Associates, had the assignment of introducing the continuous improvement concept to the entire staff so that all staff could be aware of what some of their co-workers had been involved in. Although materials pertinent to our workshop assignments had been distributed at other times for reaction and comment, the Staff Institute Day was the first time everyone could react together on the final Constancy of Purpose draft proposal adopted by the library board two months earlier.

I felt good that day when the Constancy of Purpose was reviewed and, particularly, that every statement was simple, but effective. Using a present tense rather than a future tense in the Mission and the Vision statements is a way of affirming success. The new way is to be presumptuous (or confident?): "the library is," not "the library will be."

Composing a concise Vision statement was even more important to me in the continuous improvement system framework than the Mission statement itself, because the Vision statement our library adopted became the cornerstone of our direction for the design and aesthetics of a building project.

The Vision statement formally adopted by the library board in December 2003 was:

"The Jeffersonville Township Public Library is a dynamic community destination."

Both the Vision statement and the Mission statement are to-the-point, concise, and memorable. Call me at 2 a.m. and I'll tell you without hesitation, "The library is a dynamic community destination" and "We shall provide exemplary public service."

Perhaps there is a little bit of luck in everything we do when we are satisfied with the results. I can't imagine having any better Vision or Mission statement that says exactly what the library staff and board actually feel than the statements which we have adopted, and that is why we are in the library business. Knowing that the library board believes this to be true gives me the assurance that the library community also holds this belief as well. From the very beginning when this Vision statement was coined by the staff committee in 2003, whenever a program presentation was made to a club or group, this phrase served as the basis for discussion and we discovered that it raised the community's level of expectation.

Because the building project encompassed renovation of an existing structure, as well as building a second floor over the original library building, the public was able to see the progress of the construction. Newspaper articles always referenced the special dynamics of the building: interior and exterior water features, extensive landscaping, a rooftop terrace, and meeting spaces.

The dynamics of any project are the result of many creative people and funding capabilities. Descriptive words used by the media and the public were always positive. They showed that people were not only pleased, but impressed. I wonder if we would have been as successful with the renovation and expansion had we not set out to make the library a dynamic destination for Jeffersonville Township?

Now that we have survived the three years since we first moved out of our library building into temporary quarters in January 2004, and moved back into our new facility in January 2007, I recognize that our first effort at continuous improvement made a significant contribution to a successful opening. Library employees have exhibited the Values we included in our Constancy of Purpose: the values of *accessible, knowledgeable, respectful, responsive, and welcoming*.

Recognizing those Values which are important to us, staff are empowered to insure four Key Success Factors that support our Mission. Although equal among the four, the one Key Success Factor that I feel stands out the most is:

We develop positive long-term relationships with customers.

Having said that, we must not forget that we are indeed in a feedback loop in our Constancy of Purpose system map, and the purpose is continuous improvement. We must go around and around, always aware that our Values do not change, they just get refined; our Key Success Factors remain (in old terms—our goals). Regardless of how any part of our process changes, we will continue to:

- provide diversified collections and popular programming,
- deliver library services through cutting edge technology and facilities,
- support a competent and friendly staff; and
- develop positive long-term relationship with our customers.

If we keep doing all of the above successfully, then, we shall always be a *dynamic community destination*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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