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Editorial

Peggy Johnson



I am writing this editorial in late December in very unusual weather for Minnesota. We have no snow on the ground and yesterday the temperature was the same in Minneapolis as it was in Atlanta. Many things are veering from the expected. Does that mean we should not plan for the future because the future is so unpredictable? I still have my winter emergency supplies loaded in the car even though this winter has been mild and is likely to continue milder than last year. I consider this a form of contingency planning. Contingency planning is directed toward preparing for one possible and usually undesirable future. Libraries prepare disaster contingency plans. Such a plan begins by identifying the possible disaster, such as a flood, and consequences for facilities, services, and collections, and develops appropriate steps to respond to those circumstances.

What other types of planning do libraries use? Master planning is top-down planning that begins in an administrative office. Unit plans are prepared consistent with the master plan. This approach, although it means that initiative at the unit level is constrained and the master plan may not account for the reality of day-to-day work, is fairly simple because not much is open to debate. Strategic planning has an external focus and requires continually monitoring changes in the environment to devise an appropriate response. It usually begins with a vision of the organization's future that serves as a guide to crafting goals, objectives, and strategies that form the plan. Strategic planning is broadly participative and remains an open-ended, continuous process revised at regular intervals. Scenario planning considers alternative futures and formulates strategies in each of those futures. A common example has been planning for various budget allocations—what would the library do with a 3 percent increase, a flat budget, a 3 percent decrease, a 5 percent decrease? Opportunistic planning, sometimes called entrepreneurial planning, is a laissez-faire approach and implies acting immediately when and while an opportunity arises. This approach can make librarians frantic because they do not know what is coming next and when or how they will have to do something completely different.

Drucker wrote that formal planning is improving the “futura” of decisions.¹ Some of the approaches to planning described above do so, others do not. I have spent much of my professional career involved in planning—for a new automated system, a system upgrade, a revised cataloging code, a retrospective conversion project, collection moves, new facilities, a withdrawal project, and more. I have found that the more detailed the plans, the better the projects go. If, for example, a collection must be moved by a certain date, one develops a project calendar working backward from that date. Gantt charts are a useful tool for mapping the sequence of steps and the dependencies, clarifying tasks and responsibilities, and tracking the completion of each assignment. I love a plan because it can look so orderly. The caveat is that projects never go as planned. Eisenhower is credited with saying “In preparing for battle, I have always found that plans are useless but planning is indispensable.”² Most projects are not as orderly as one would like, but starting with a plan and recognizing that it will

have to be revised as the project advances will improve the futurity of any initiative.

One of my favorite gifts this past Christmas was a Lego kit to build the Frank Lloyd Wright–designed house, Fallingwater. It contained 801 pieces and took me nearly eight hours to complete. I loved it! I have been pondering why the project was so much fun. I think one reason I enjoyed it is because Lego kits are so orderly—the instructions are detailed and clear, one completes each step (which may have several steps within it) before moving on to the next, and, when one does the steps in order, the result is an impressive

project one can admire. I wish all library projects came with printed, spiral-bound instructions, and were as straightforward and as satisfying as a Lego kit.

References

1. Peter Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974): 125.
2. Notable Quotes, Dwight D. Eisenhower Quotes, www.notable-quotes.com/e/eisenhower_dwight_d.html (accessed Dec. 27, 2011).



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