



## Embracing Change When it's Happening to You!

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### Abstract

We live in a world of rapid change and increasing complexity. Libraries are no exception. Each of us has a choice of how to respond to these changes, either proactively or reactively. This article is a write-up of our session at the 2015 PNLA Conference: Pushing the Boundaries. At the session, we introduced change concepts, provided opportunities for participants to explore change in their own lives, gave a few examples of how libraries and staff have responded proactively to change, and introduced concepts for participants to build resiliency in themselves and their staff.

### Introduction

Libraries and library staff are no strangers to change. The history of libraries is full of disruption and paradigm-shifting changes. For instance, the printing press completely disrupted libraries in the mid-1500's. However, once librarians adapted to mass-produced books, they found themselves with immense collections they had to manage, catalog, and make equitably accessible (Plutchak, 2012). Adaptability is key to embracing any changes, but especially paradigm-level changes.

If Plutchak is right about this book-collecting era being the "Great Age of Libraries," and is also right that we are entering the "Great Age of Librarians," this requires a shift in focus from libraries to librarians and skilled paraprofessionals (2012). In other words, staff become central, as does their ability to embrace change.

With library staff being centrally important, rather than the buildings and collections themselves, the lens needs to be shifted to refocus on what librarians and other staff do that is so key. Rather than merely storing and sharing knowledge, they are central to facilitating the creation of new knowledge, particularly in their communities (Plutchak, 2012). This puts them in the middle of a great deal of change that not only happens around them, but in many ways is co-created by them. They co-create change with their communities when they facilitate new knowledge creation. This becomes a positive feedback loop of new knowledge creation, changes, knowledge shared, and more new knowledge created.

Therefore, change is not only happening to and around librarians, but is actually created via their facilitation of knowledge sharing and creation. In fact, Matheson (1995) suggests that librarians not merely respond to change but actually become agents of change. To be a change agent requires the ability to embrace change, whether the change is generated by oneself or not.

Interestingly, many Organizational Development concepts, such as change agent, have been finding their way into the library realm for the last couple of decades. For instance, Stephens and Russell (2004) explore a variety of Organizational Development concepts in regard to libraries, and assert that "changes in libraries can be anticipated, planned, and implemented in better ways" (p. 240). In other words, librarians are able to be more effective when proactivity is utilized in the face of change.

Stephens and Russell also advise libraries to use empowerment properly so it is not an empty management buzzword that results in cynicism (2004). Staff need to be empowered in real ways, where they are trusted to make decisions and feel safe taking on responsibility. This gives them the space and flexibility necessary to be proactive agents of change and to embrace change in general.

However, whether or not library staff work in a culture that encourages and empowers them as proactive change agents, there are things they can do to embrace, navigate, and recover from changes that are happening to them. As the saying goes, the only constant is change, and that makes embracing change a vital skill to have as a library professional.

### **PNLA Session: Embracing Change When it's Happening to You!**

Library conferences, such as the PNLA Conference, are a great place to learn new ideas from presenters and other conference-goers while also cultivating inspiration from within. Conferences can also help attendees remember what they already know and bring new light to their experiences. Interactive sessions, such as the Embracing Change session, provide opportunities to learn something new, share experience and knowledge, and connect with colleagues with similar or even polar opposite experiences. It was our intention to build all of this into our hour-long session.

### **Raise Your Hands in the Air**

Jennifer Fenton, the Director of the Ogden Resource Center at the Washington State School for the Blind in Vancouver, WA, began the session by asking everyone to raise their hands if they had experienced a change at work or home in the last year, month, week? Unsurprisingly, every participant raised their hand for year and month, and most kept their hand raised for week. They could see they were not alone in their experience of both perpetual and recent change.

### **Introduction to Change**

After brief introductions from the presenters, Leslie Boyter introduced two change concepts. The first concept, VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity), originated with the military and has been taken up by businesses to describe the dynamic world we now live in (Complexity Learning, 2014). After a brief introduction to the concept, she recommended participants look for videos about VUCA on YouTube to learn more.

Then Leslie introduced a second change concept, the neutral zone, from Bridges (2004). Bridges' model of transitions, moving from an old state to the neutral zone to a new state, is a simple yet enlightening model and makes for a great jumping off point for discussions.

She noted that some people try to skip the neutral zone altogether, jumping directly from the old state to the new state before the new state even exists, and others try to hang on to the old state as long as possible to avoid the neutral zone and the new state. The neutral zone is an uncomfortable, but necessary stage in the transition from one state to another. Part of embracing change is finding a way to sit in the neutral zone without jumping prematurely to the next state or hanging on for dear life to the old state.

### **Mini-conversations**

In order to bring the change concepts home for participants, Jennifer led an activity called Mad Hatter Tea Party to get everyone thinking about change and how to embrace it rather than get steam-rolled. The 30 or so participants were asked to form two concentric circles with the participants in the inside circle facing out and the participants in the outside circle facing in, such that each was facing a conversation partner.

Jennifer began by asking the pairs to take one minute each person to answer the first question, "What is the most challenging change you have had to deal with?" Although it is a difficult ques-

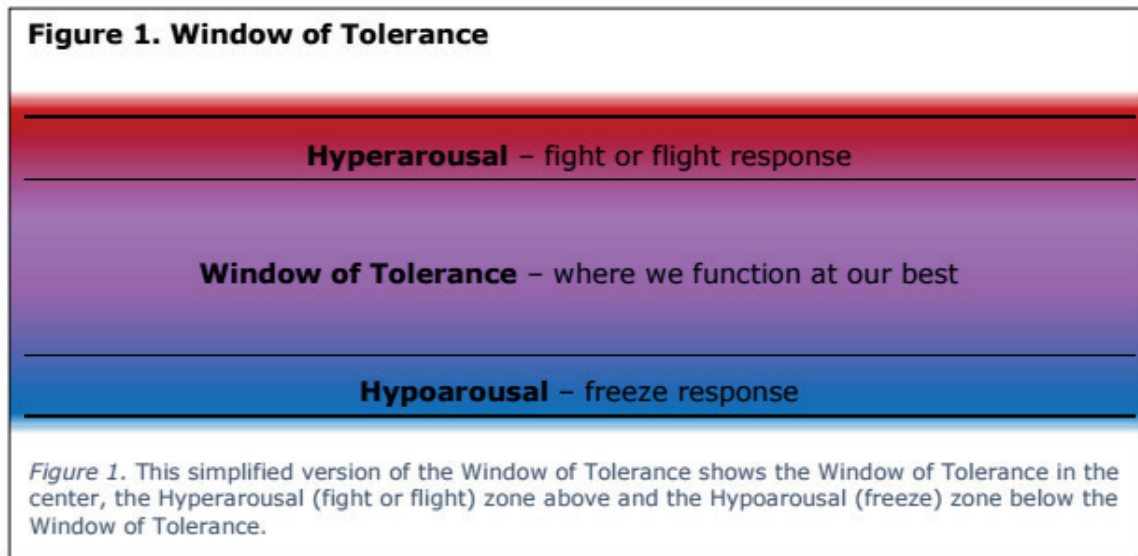
tion to answer on the spot and in such a short period of time, the session participants came up with some great answers, such as career transitions, staffing changes, and taking risks. Other topics that came up in their discussions were the ability to choose one's own attitude even if one has no control over a change and the idea that "you can't go back home again" because both the person and the "home" changes.

Next, Jennifer had them change partners by having the outer ring of people stay where they are and the inner ring move one person to the right. Once everyone had a new partner, Jennifer asked them to take one minute each to answer the following question: "How did you help someone (a family member, friend, or colleague) navigate a change?" Again, the participants came up with great answers to share with the whole group, such as helping others to change their attitude toward the change, supporting someone while they go through the grieving process (grieving the old state), modeling how to navigate change, and building partnerships.

Finally, Jennifer had them change partners one more time for the last question. Once again, each pair had one minute per person to share their answers to the question. Jennifer asked them, "What unexpected benefits emerged from a difficult change?" This seemed to be the trickiest question for them to answer, yet they came up with valuable insights to share, such as the benefits of bonding through challenges, resilience, and the creation of opportunities for interdependence.

### **Anxiety, Excitement, and Tolerance**

Leslie followed the Mad Hatter activity with a brief introduction to change and anxiety versus excitement. She introduced Siegel's (2011) concept of the Window of Tolerance, mapping fight, flight and freeze into their corresponding areas (see Figure 1). Imagine the window as a horizontal band of tolerance, anything above the band is hyperarousal (fight or flight mode) and anything below the band is hypoarousal (freeze mode). Neither extreme lends itself to dealing well with change.



Within the window of tolerance we have access to our evolved human faculties; outside the window of tolerance we are stressed and chaotic or depressed and rigid, reacting from a more primitive set of response options (Siegel, 2011). Stressed and chaotic correspond to the fight or flight response while depressed and rigid corresponds to the freeze (e.g. withdrawal) response.

The goal is to stretch and expand the window of tolerance so that we have a wider range within which we function at our best. One way to do this is with mindfulness exercises (Siegel, 2011). Practicing mindfulness is an excellent way to develop awareness and work toward expanding one's window of tolerance. The sooner we can catch ourselves in a reactive response, the sooner

we can bring ourselves back to a thoughtful place where we can choose our response consciously.

To combat anxiety in the moment, Leslie suggested one method to get grounded, both literally and figuratively. She told session participants that when they are feeling anxious or stressed to try going outside and standing barefoot in the grass, exchanging ions with the Earth. Not everyone has the luxury of kicking off their shoes and standing in the grass while at work though. In that case she suggested getting their feet flat on the floor and focusing on breathing. If one looks up any mindfulness exercises, one will find focusing on breathing is an important basic element of mindfulness.

On the other hand, in some instances it may be more appropriate to shift feelings of anxiety toward feelings of excitement. If calmness is not what is needed in the moment, such as when one is about to give a speech, channeling the anxious energy into excitement energy can be both powerful and inspirational to self and others. When someone's body is pumping adrenaline into the bloodstream, the physical experience of excitement is almost indistinguishable from anxiety. The distinction primarily lives in perspective. It makes sense to try to use this energy productively when appropriate, rather than always trying to get rid of it. Another element of mindfulness is developing enough self-awareness to be able to choose one's response, and sometimes the best choice is to shift perspective to turn anxiety into excitement.

That is not to say the shift from anxiety to excitement is always easy. It is simple, not easy. For instance, when feeling anxious about a situation, one can look for the opportunities that may arise. It may be helpful to ask questions such as, "what benefits might come from this change?" or "what new options may open up?" Even when the situation is stressful, there is usually something new and exciting to learn, and even when the future is unknown, there are ways of being proactive to see what possibilities are just around the corner. Someone does not have to be Pollyanna to see exciting prospects for the future. It only takes a little proactive perspective-shifting.

### **Movers & Shakers of Proactivity**

Next, Jennifer shared some examples of proactivity by Movers and Shakers in the library world. *Library Journal's* Movers & Shakers is a great place to find examples of Change Agents, Innovators, and other proactive people with inspiring ideas and stories. Jennifer shared two great examples from *Library Journal's* 2015 Movers & Shakers: <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2015/03/people/movers-shakers-2015/movers-shakers-2015/#>.

First, Jennifer shared the story of K.C. Boyd who uses urban fiction (i.e. street lit) with her high school students (*LJ*, 2015). This is one example of a librarian listening to what her customers want rather than maintaining the status quo. She is providing them with materials that speak to them, which then helps the students to connect more with other literature and draw parallels to both the urban fiction and their own lives. Urban fiction is only one example of the many things Boyd is doing to better serve her students. Her willingness to embrace change, listen to feedback, and be proactive has had a tremendously positive impact on her students.

Then, Jennifer shared the story of Tysha Shay who developed Stories for Life, an outreach program to take services directly to underserved patrons in adult facilities (*LJ*, 2015). As is often the case, Tysha Shay's proactive program was inspired by personal life experiences. She spent time as a caregiver for her grandmother who developed dementia and then Alzheimer's, and this time with her grandmother made her aware of the unique struggles of older adults. Bringing this awareness back to work with her, she developed a program to better serve older adults by bringing them stories, poetry, memory games, and more.

K.C. Boyd and Tysha Shay are only two of the many examples of proactive Movers & Shakers in

the library world. Another great place to learn about librarians creating ripples of change is at conferences; both presenters and audience members have compelling stories to share. Finally, there are also many unsung librarian and paralibrarian superheroes, which means the only way to find out about them is to ask around to see what people are working on. This can be a great way to find inspirational stories of change agents in the library world and to connect with others on the proactive journey of embracing change.

### **Strategies for Proactivity**

Jennifer led another activity to elicit strategies for proactivity in the face of change. This activity was a modified version of 1-2-4-all from *Liberating Structures*, a set of activities developed by Lipmanowicz and McCandless to unleash a culture of innovation and make meetings more interesting and productive (2014). In the modified version we captured participants' ideas on a flip chart, ideas such as planning and having conversations ahead of the change, creating contingency plans, bringing humor into the situation, tying everything back to the mission (i.e. why do we exist?), breaking everything down into manageable parts, documenting the messy and experimental aspects of change as they occur, benchmarking, maintaining awareness of the variety of different reactions to change, and practicing self-care.

### **Check-out**

Leslie wrapped up the session by asking participants to give a one-word check-out. This one-word check-out is a quick way for participants to get clear on what the most salient part of the session was for them, think about what it means to them and what they will do with it, and share in a way that is both enlightening and yet mysterious. What will each participant do with the insights and information? What does that one word mean to them, personally? In the end, we embrace both change and a bit of ambiguity.

### **Conclusion**

The ideas participants came up with are a great example of why it is valuable to come together in an interactive session to explore ideas such as embracing change when it is happening to you. Each person has their own skills and knowledge, stories, examples, and perspective that add value to the conversation. People build on the content presented, on each other's ideas, and on their own insights.

Embracing change when it is happening to you is not always easy. Being a proactive agent of change takes effort. Turning anxiety into excitement or getting grounded requires self-awareness. And looking for opportunities when in a stressful situation takes some perspective-shifting. However, when the alternative is to feel helpless, frustrated, angry, anxious, withdrawn, or left behind, making the effort to embrace change is worth it.

Luckily, there is a whole community of Pacific Northwest Librarians (not to mention the many librarians outside of the Pacific Northwest) working on embracing change. Tapping into this community is a great way to find mutual support in the adventure that is embracing change.

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