

## **Building Collaborative Teams for Innovative Solutions**

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**Abstract:** This case study examines the process used by three librarians who jointly applied for a library innovation fellowship in order to understand the collaborative experience of library team members. Although the library fellowship application was not funded, the participants undertook research to determine the elements that produced such a fruitful learning experience. An inductive content analysis methodology of written reflections collected from each librarian resulted in four emerging themes. The authors offer recommendations to academic library managers interested in increasing team motivation and participation, which include reflecting on themes of team diversity, choice, inclusion, and trust.

### **Introduction**

Supporting interdisciplinary research and collaboration in institutions requires team functionality, and as a result librarianship is increasingly becoming a "team sport" rather than a solo practice. Teams contribute to a culture of ideation -- and ultimately, innovation - which can help libraries meet the challenges of a rapidly-changing world. Additionally, the American Library Association's (2019) core organizational values include "an open, inclusive, and collaborative environment" and "excellence and innovation."

While libraries use teams in many work contexts, there are few formal, library management studies focused on team composition or dynamics. This case study documents the authors' participation in team-based ideation work on a fellowship application and investigates group success despite the organization not funding the project. The article provides suggested strategies for team-building for wider applications across organizations.

### **Literature Review**

A review of literature within the social sciences - including management and the library sciences - illuminates research relevant to this case study. Library science research indicates that libraries are utilizing team-based models to deliver services, build collections, and/or enhance processes (Stoddard, Gillis, & Cohn 2019; Vander Broek & Rodgers 2015; Stapleton

2013). In particular, Vander Broek & Rogers' (2015) case study model which allowed for staffing based upon interest, expertise, and domain knowledge demonstrates an opportunity for libraries to create programming in a more nimble way (p. 140). A library that capitalized on their employees' "psychological capital, gratitude, positive speech, trust that yields safety to take risks, transcendent sharing based on strengths and flow, virtuous behaviors, and many other phenomena and behaviors" performed exceptionally despite being consistently financially under resourced, suggesting that culture and leadership may affect positive change even in the face of significant challenges (Stapleton, 2013, p. 86). Stoddard, Gillis, and Cohn (2019) have more recently applied Agile project management to allow for library staff to develop cross-functional teams for collection development workflows. Libraries also work with external partners to support stakeholders or activities across campus (Sclippa 2017). Sclippa's (2017) research indicates that a breadth of team members' interests and skills, rather than commonality, was the successful factor in developing a broad network which led to fruitful external partnerships (p. 133).

While library managers typically form teams with function or disciplinary expertise in mind (Wissinger, Raish, Miller, & Steve Borrelli 2018), other aspects can be nurtured in order to enhance performance. For example, within management literature, distributed or shared leadership across a team has been shown to have a positive relationship to performance over and above team size and gender diversity (Karriker, Madden, & Katell 2017). In addition to shared leadership, increased trust within teams benefits all members, despite the challenges inherent in forming them. Mach and Baruch's research indicates trust among team members, particularly those on cross cultural project teams, contributes to overall performance (2015). In a formal quantitative study of graduate and undergraduate business school students, the authors identified a correlation between team consensus and team trust (Mach and Baruch 2015). Further, this study showed that the "collective team orientation indirectly influences performance through its effects on team trust (p. 476)".

Finally, various aspects of a team—knowledge, diversity, leadership, and atmosphere (Park, Lew & Lee 2018; D'souza & Dastmalchi 2016)—can have an impact on team creativity and innovative output. In particular, Park, Lew & Lee, establish that status inequality within a team has a negative effect on the team's creativity, even though knowledge diversity among members is high. Researchers recommend special consideration of team members' individual status within an organization be taken when forming teams in order to develop a highly-creative team (2018). D'souza & Dastmalchi investigated the effect of team member disciplinary affiliation, expertise, and academic standing within interdisciplinary design teams through a protocol analysis method designed to capture incidents of smaller creative events which contributed toward larger creative incidents. The study found that "while there were genuine differences between the team member background in knowledge, disciplines and expertise, a high level of collaboration also occurred (p. 35)." Research within management studies offers insights which may be beneficial for library managers when forming teams at their libraries and may be further assessed for efficacy by library science researchers.

## **Case Study**

In 2018 the authors decided to apply for an American Library Association Future of Libraries Fellowship. Participants all had current or former branch library leadership experience, and understood their managerial skills as advantageous for the process of designing and implementing an innovative fellowship. Before the collaborative process, participants identified a number of mutual interests: exhibiting innovation in personal library practice; celebrating stories of innovation in libraries; and utilizing visual representations of knowledge. The common ground of shared passions fueled the collaboration and quickly created a synergistic effect, which ultimately produced a final proposal that was both compelling and competitive.

Since our fellowship application focused on ideation, participants formed an ideation team and met as equal collaborators to discuss a list of over twenty potential project approaches and outcomes. All ideas were considered and none were dismissed at this stage. Eventually, the three librarians decided to push some ideas up to the top through a voting system. Each librarian agreed to select a limited number of ideas they were most passionate about, coming to a consensus about the ideas the group would continue to collectively consider. This process required a great deal of trust in other colleagues to understand that voting for a few ideas did not diminish the value of those ideas left behind. The team then turned to discussing areas of overlap, and understanding what motivated each librarian to advocate for a method or outcome. For example, a librarian may have voted for ideas that they believed would be most competitive for the fellowship application, while another librarian had prioritized an idea which may have allowed the team to engage in building new skills. Continued discussion of the remaining options allowed the team to narrow the focus of the project, embrace the final strategy through consensus, and complete their fellowship proposal.

Although the team members were not awarded the fellowship in the most recent funding cycle, all participants independently expressed the team dynamics and practices which they engaged in nurtured ideation and collaborative decision making. Drawing upon each team members' written reflections and individual journal notes, the participants conducted a thematic content analysis to understand why the team associated success with the experience. The four findings, described below, explore the observations shared among each of the three participants.

## **Findings**

### **Build Teams with Difference**

In this case study, we intentionally engaged in collaborative practice within the constraints of an overwhelmingly white, cis-female organization. The team was formed out of the desire (and need) to draw upon multiple professional backgrounds, as well as broad disciplinary research and expertise. Team members drew upon more than three decades of combined

professional experience from eleven different institutions in various regions of the United States; with disciplinary expertise in Social Sciences, Humanities, and Sciences; and qualitative and quantitative methodological traditions. Managers who acknowledge and value difference within their library staff and their working methods communicate their value of staff as people.

### **Provide Choice**

The findings of this case study also revealed that an individual team member's ability to choose to participate in the project was a significant factor in overall team engagement and ultimate success because it set the stage for teammates to connect with one another around their shared interests and passions (Vander Broek & Rogers 2015). One member wrote the following in her reflection notes: "My passion and excitement was related to my ability to choose to participate in a blue sky thinking instead of required or assigned work." In addition, choice was understood as flexibility in physical meeting location, with one participant commenting, "This work could not have been done as easily and seamlessly in one of our offices or library meeting rooms. There is something really life-giving to me about meeting away from the day-to-day places of work to (re)create and innovate away from our daily place."

### **Practice Inclusion**

Our process for understanding others' ideas meant spending intentional time together in our meetings, ensuring all voices and ideas were heard. Each team member presented their ideas and answered any questions other members had about them. The team subsequently used a semi-structured method based upon Quaker business meeting practices of discernment to choose the ideas for the project. The Quaker practice of discernment was included as a result of one participant's lived experience. Although the other participants did not identify as Quaker, they benefited during this experience from this practice. As a result of this approach, the team reported feeling their ideas were heard and valued, even if they weren't among the ideas that were implemented.

### **Cultivate Trust**

Team members understood the importance of building trust during the ideation process. In this context, trust means that team members can be professionally honest with each other without fearing reprimand, take professional risks without fearing ridicule, and express vulnerabilities without the fear of judgement. Team members were invited to cast a wide net of initial ideas--from traditional to practical to just plain kooky. The approach reduced participant vulnerability in the process of sharing, because team members knew that producing a large number of ideas would include sharing some that would not be useful, valuable, or realistic. One participant explained, "I wasn't just given the floor for two minutes to fully explain my best idea, which reduced the pressure of producing and judging each idea. I'm always more productive when I am able to wear my creator hat and my critic hat in separate experiences." Because the process involved suspending critique of ideas, participants explained they felt safe to take risks; ultimately, the team generated ideas more productively.

By establishing trust, participants were able to explore each of the options openly and honestly. Team members categorized items from the brainstorm list into three categories: 1) unrealistic within constraints of budget, time, and/or expertise; 2) good ideas, but not appropriate for the grant; 3) intriguing and worth further exploration. This process led to one participant in our group being able to share ideas which she stated "scared" her. This finding supports previous findings by a team of librarians learning digital humanities techniques (Bello, Dickerson, Hogarth, & Sanders 2017)

## **Recommendations**

Based on the evidence from our case study, the authors present the following recommendations intended for supervisors who are creating teams or facilitating team-based projects. Depending upon their understanding of current climate, supervisors may find it more appropriate to focus on one or more of these practices, in order to build a stronger culture to support team functionality.

### **Know & Celebrate Individual Strengths**

In order to maximize institutional potential for innovation, be aware of your team member's personal knowledge domains, aspirations, and related experience. Another way to enhance outcomes is to bring together individuals with different identities, backgrounds, strengths and perspectives. Constructing teams based on outdated models of commonality (i.e. disciplinary commonalities) can produce a disengaged workforce with lackluster results (Baldwin & Migneault 1996; Karriker, Madden & Katell 2017; Frost 2018).

To enhance morale and productivity, managers can review past performance accomplishments and previous work experience when considering team composition. Formal and informal assessments can be adapted to specific library and project contexts and used to identify individuals' strengths. Building in reflective time at the end of a work session to discuss how participants feel their strengths are contributing to group activities allows for informal assessment (Tipton & Watson 2021). Formal assessment may include written feedback during annual evaluations which addresses the ways in which an individual has shared their strengths, as well as suggestions for additional opportunities (Schachter 2004). Managers can provide intentional time for teams to discover their commonalities which enhance a shared understanding of purpose. Acknowledge your teams' achievements publicly and celebrate their instrumental role in attaining the library's larger goals.

### **Develop Inclusive Processes**

Innovation feeds off of inclusion; the more voices and ideas in the room, the greater potential for innovative librarianship. Managers should ensure the meeting space is accessible for those with disabilities or need accommodations. In addition, managers will need to consider providing resources which allow employees to step away from service points, travel distances, and/or shift away from other projects in order to contribute. These strategies should be employed for synchronous and asynchronous environments, as well as online and offline.

Inequality in status among team members has been shown to be a negative force on team creativity despite additional diversity of team member function (Park, Lew & Lee). Best practices for developing inclusion involve managers being mindful of any single person (including the manager) dominating the conversation in the room and deliberately making space for others' productive contributions and ideas. Before making decisions, managers can invite each team member to brainstorm ideas broadly without censoring for limitations such as feasibility, cost, novelty, or relevance (Marchant 1993; Molaro 2019). Afterwards, managers can provide a mechanism for sharing, so that all team members know and understand the breadth of possibilities (Hu & Randel 2014). Managers may articulate the expectation that sharing ideas is separate from the process of critiquing ideas in order to avoid limitations.

### **Use Choice**

An innovative culture benefits from individuals who are given agency. Team members are more likely to be invested in and motivated by the processes and outcomes when given choice about project participation and ways they might contribute. Projects in which library managers invite external stakeholders to participate have been shown to have positive outcomes in which workers perform at a high level (Sclippa, 2017). Staffing teams with library workers based upon their individual interests and strengths also allowed workers to be effective and responsive. Before selecting team members, managers can provide opportunities for individuals to voice their interest in a particular team and/or self-select the teams on which they would like to work. Once teams are formed, team members can share their reasons for choosing a particular project or team in order to gain insight into the motivating factors and individual strengths, which can help determine future tasks or roles. In addition, this explanation can help draw connections between people, creating a bond that produces synergy amongst the group and resulting outcomes. Managers can encourage participants to co-determine location and methods in order to support collaborative efforts.

### **Build Trust**

Building a climate of trust takes time, however the effort that managers invest in this endeavor contributes to a healthier, more innovative library culture. Managers could first give the team an opportunity to establish essential agreements, which are co-created expectations about how the team will function. In Illustration A, a component of the Ohio State University's Libraries' 2018 community agreements are listed. Once agreements like these are adopted, the group may consider discussing shared responsibility for embodying and enforcing them, so the manager is not solely tasked with this work. Ultimately, the findings of this case study confirm Bello, Dickerson, Hogarth & Sanders' statement that "trust was, and is, essential to the success of the team (p. 101). Library managers may adopt the Agile methodology of asking teams to draft and abide by team agreements (Stoddard, Gillis, & Cohn 2019, p. 510)

### **Illustration A**



- We create a safe and inclusive space for conversation that allows for many voices and dissenting ideas. It is in this place of dissent that we can find healthy and necessary growth.
- We ask questions necessary to move the conversation forward. When asked a question, we are open to sharing and keeping in mind that we are all in different places of learning and understanding.
- We speak up if we need clarification, have a salient point to share or need space to process before responding. Our silence will be taken as agreement and/or understanding.
- We fully engage in and contribute to discussion in support of decision making. A range of decision-making methods can be employed, depending on context. At decision points, we are clear about the method to be used and seek active participation in the process. Once a decision is made, we support the decision of the organization, even if it might differ from our own perspective.
- We challenge the status quo and past precedent. We can honor our past while asking if there is a better way to do something.
- We leverage, acknowledge and respect each other's expertise.
- We assume positive intent. We all want to contribute to the success of the organization.
- We take notes of key points and outcomes to share with our stakeholders. If we have questions about what can be shared, we ask for clarification.

In addition, intentional communication builds trust. Managers may solicit the team's thoughts and feelings associated with the potential outcome throughout the decision-making process. Whenever possible, managers can respond with honesty, authenticity, and vulnerability in order to maintain an openness in the communication process. Team members who understand how and why decisions are made are more likely to trust their manager. An explanation of a decision-making process can go a long way toward a manager's credibility.

## **Case Study Limitations**

Although this experience nurtured the team's ideation process and produced strong outcomes, the authors recognize the limitations of this brief collaboration. The authors had the autonomy to self-select the team, work environment, and time invested toward the collaboration. Research has shown that giving current staff opportunities to increase skills to meet challenging projects, as well as pooling staff resources from other unaffiliated departments, may benefit the organization (Stoddard, Gillis, & Cohn 2019; Vander Broek & Rodgers 2015). Another limiting factor is that high-stakes projects with very little autonomy that require fast turn-around have the possibility to limit team dynamics and ultimately the innovative outcomes.

The authors also acknowledge that our outcomes were limited by our range of vision as cis, white, able-bodied women. Although our collective, historical background includes class diversity, the depth and breadth of our ideation, conversations, methodologies, and products were limited by the lack of a diverse team. The authors have experienced, in other professional contexts, that diverse teams which challenge an organization's hegemony are vital for innovation and transformation.

## **Conclusion**

This article presents the managerial team-building practices of knowing and celebrating strengths, practicing inclusion, using choice, and building trust that emerged during a case study. In particular, we believe that identification of individual strengths is a missed opportunity in many organizational cultures. The authors see an opportunity for leaders to effect change by identifying individuals who have previously-unidentified strengths that they may contribute to projects. Even seemingly small changes to teams may make a noticeable difference in the way they function. The authors recommend these strategies not as a quick-fix for complicated issues that take time and care to resolve; instead, we offer them as a starting place for managers, as they begin a long and important journey to bring about meaningful and lasting change and further a culture of innovation.

In addition, the authors suggest that our profession would benefit from qualitative and quantitative examinations of team composition as well as the dynamics of highly-functioning teams in libraries. Sustained commitments to library management research, practice, and education would support a stronger management ethos that has the power to change organizations and the profession.



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