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“Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again: involving staff in redesigning your library”

Introduction

I inherited a 24,000 square foot single story, Marimeko flower-shaped floor plan, cedar-sided library building built in 2002. There were various complaints about service and space needs left over from the six-year contentious building process, completed 2 years before I began as Director. It seemed no one much liked the new library but they did like many of the staff. I was hired to increase circulation and make the patrons & staff happier.

BUILDING INTERIOR –

- 1st PROJECT – ROTUNDA PROBLEM

Problem

- A center rotunda that had book stacks radiating out like spokes on a wheel and no sight lines so Circulation, Ref, Youth services desks weren't visible to each other
- Noise levels that were uncomfortable for patrons and staff
- Poor lighting (noisy ballasts and low light)
- No interior decoration beyond books, except at Christmas when a very large and ornately decorated tree dominated the center (we have a diverse clientele, ethnically and religiously)
- Lots of furniture but no hassocks

Objective: to reorganize layout and floor plan to allow for sight lines among desks and create an inviting central seating/reading area.

Work methods

- In my opinion, committees don't work very well on small design projects. These are the reasons: committees have no ultimate power or responsibility, only the director or the Village Manager has that. Generally the members craft solutions that makes each of them feel good and may become invested in their views not in the final product. Committees are great for crafting policy and other larger issues but are cumbersome for smaller design projects. Since the buck stops with the director that person shouldn't shrink from the responsibility of finding the solution to a design problem. However, no one person has all the answers so:
 - Know what you need to fix
 - Ask the opinions of the key people invested in the solution to the problem but don't make them feel they have to solve it
 - Remember to really listen, for new answers, because it is polite, and because you won't get these people to buy into the solution without this.

- Be open to serendipity
- I ask individuals personally and informally what they want and feel might work – this includes staff and patrons and Village administrators
- Keep going back to stack holders throughout the project.
- Celebrate at least with your attitude, each hurdle and final product.
- Once a problem is identified, I think about it and come up with some possible solutions. In the case of the rotunda, I figured that a triangle rather than spokes on a wheel was a simple and elegant solution (not cheap and easy but simple and elegant).
- I brought individual staff/patrons to the space, gave them the idea of the triangle and walked through their suggestions and discussed these on site.
- I read books, articles on theory but did not require my staff to do this.
- The Friends and the Library Foundation each contributed the funds to make this project work.
- Remember to bring enthusiasm and fun to those who work with you and do the hard part yourself or hire out.

Process of relocating, providing prominence, reorganizing, redesigning

- My Office Coordinator and IT staff helped locate drawings, specs and as-builts. I called the architectural firm that finished the building to find out if it was uniformly load bearing. – it was.
- I then had drawings duplicated and stacks were drawn to scale and duplicated so we could move them around
- I talked with Head of Adult Services and told her about problem and showed her how to manipulate the scale drawings and furnishings. We discussed if any collections needed to be removed or added to the rotunda. I measured the linear feet of each collection in the rotunda. Then I counted the linear feet of shelves available with the new configuration. When there were enough shelves for the basic collection I determined where extra shelves for display would be placed. The shelves were numbered and described individually as existing and then each number was transferred to the new position in the revised configuration. The Head of Adult Reference then took these plans and checked them.
- When we had the configuration the way we wanted, I called three library movers [used Michael Fenwick of ACE Worldwide (630-573-1975)] and had them bid on the moving job. They moved and shifted while staff shelf-read.
- Once this was reconfigured, we worked on hassocks, paint, plants, decorations, lighting. For lighting I called an expert who was also free [Piliput-Grist & Assoc. 847-228-6633] and she put together a plan based on foot candles needed and fixtures similar to what we had. We didn't use her plan for the rotunda because that was more about atmosphere than foot candles. I got the idea for various task lighting fixtures, which the Office Coordinator and I found at Target & Ikea & Home Depot, while sitting in a woman's spa on the north side of Chicago. We did have to rewire and add floor outlets but it was cheaper than the alternative (probably). A patron recently contacted me asking why we didn't use conservation lighting [suggested 3-way bulb from Feit Elec. Co. in Pico Rivers, CA] and offering to buy us some and do an exhibit on them with his daughters.

We took him up on this generous offer and he has delivered 2 bulbs so far. We got the hassocks from Target, too.

- Colors came from talking to the Village maintenance man and to the YA librarian. Each supplied paint chip books and each had good ideas on what to use. I went with their colors suggestions, particularly the YA librarian who spent long sessions walking around the library with me and with the colors holding them up to walls and saying encouraging things to each other.

Results

- Stacks are arranged in a triangle and the lights that formerly illuminated only the ceiling are trained down to add light to the stacks. Freshly painted colorful walls surround a variety of comfortable chairs and couches, with foot hassocks and tables, configured in groups of 1 to 4 seats. There is task lighting for individual seats and additional electrical outlets. Noise is at an acceptable level. We have several display areas that allow us not to privilege the Xmas tree above the other religious symbols we exhibit in the winter holidays. There is an original bronze statue of Lincoln reading to his son by a local artist on a pedestal in center with green plants around the base and on tables. Small pieces of art, signs thanking people for not talking loudly and advertising library events, a photo of the staff, containers of pens & pencils, are found around the rotunda. Newspapers and magazines and videos are on inner shelves facing and enticing those seated in the rotunda. Sight lines among the circulation, reference and youth desks are clear. Copy room is a bright color so is evident to people across the room at the reference desk.
- **Resulted in a new layout, organization, functionality and decoration.**
- **The staff and patrons endorse the new arrangement since it was a multi-staff/patron effort where each could claim an influence and an effect on the results, but any negative results remained the responsibility of the director.**