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Evidence for Competency B

LIBR 204 – Information Organizations & Management

Public Library Undercover Assignment

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Running Head: UNDERCOVER ASSIGNMENT

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by

Mildred Arencibia

San Jose State University

LIBR 204

Information Organizations and Management

### **Abstract**

An observational analysis of a series of factors influencing operations at a public library which may be used to create a strategic operational plan. The paper discusses several external and internal environmental factors observed during the author's visit. She also analyzes the organizational culture of the library and attempts to establish how Drucker's implication, as posed by Dan Fuller's question, that the variety of contradictory constituencies affect the management of a non-profit organization, impact this library. The author concludes that in order to fulfill its mission and constituency better, the library must formulate a sound strategic plan that analyzes the library's position in the city, and takes into account all the possible variables that can affect its operations.

## **Undercover Assignment**

Recently I visited the San Bruno Public Library (SBPL) to practice doing an environmental scan. The library is located at 701 Angus Avenue West, San Bruno, California in a very unique area of the city. The library has served the city in its present location since 1955 and is one of a consortium of 32 libraries (Peninsula Library System) in San Mateo County (San Bruno Public Library, 2004, Collections & Services section, ¶ 2). As evidenced by the description in the SBPL's website (San Bruno Public Library, 2004, Library Home section, ¶ 1), the library's collection includes over 100,000 circulating items and electronic resources. Furthermore the library is flanked by City Hall and the Departments of Finance, Public Works, Human Resources and Community Development.

The objective of this exercise was to analyze an array of environmental factors that impact the management of the library. Such factors can be further grouped into external and internal variables.

### ***External Environmental Variables***

Evans, Ward & Rugaas (2000) identified ten institutional variables that influence the operations of any organization. Their premise is that an organization "(...) has a special combination of external variables that are important to it and to a degree, makes the organization unlike any other" (Evans et al., 2000, p. 14). Guiding my analysis by these principles, I was able to identify the following as they relate to the SBPL:

#### ***1. Customers***

The composition of the population is a key factor in determining its needs and therefore necessary to determine services and programs that the library can offer. The library serves a

population that is predominantly White (46.9%), Hispanic (24.1%) and Asian (18.4%) (MTC & ABAG, 2000, City of San Bruno Census section). In addition, more than half the population is composed of families with children. This explains why the library offers parent and teachers programs, in addition to other services.

My observations of the area suggested that there is a large percentage of children. This was corroborated by the City of San Bruno demographic profile which states that 19.2% of the population is under the age of 14 (MTC & ABAG, 2000, City of San Bruno Census section). It is no wonder then that the library has identified the social need to cater to this sector of the population, offering a variety of children's services such as after-school programs, preschool story times, and the Summer Reading Club.

## *2. Competitors*

SBPL is the only library serving 6.4 square miles and a total population of 40,165 (MTC & ABAG, 2000, City of San Bruno Census section). Driving around the area, I asserted that the nearest libraries are Millbrae Public Library, currently under construction, and South San Francisco Public Library. They are both more than 10 miles away from SBPL. However, as is usually the case with all non-profit organizations, the library also competes for public funding with all the public agencies with which it shares the city block!

## *3. Funding Sources*

Being a non-profit organization the library depends on critical funding from a variety of sources in order to sustain operations. From studying several pamphlets at the library, I concluded that in addition to State funding, the library depends on funding and support from individuals through its Friends of the Library organization, corporations, and the Library Foundation which has the goal of raising funds for a new library.

#### *4. Educational Interests*

The library has traditionally been synonym with self education and betterment. SBPL is no different in that it offers varied services to expand access to its collection by the community: reference collection, electronic information, and educational programs. For example, SBPL offers free Internet classes, an Adult Literacy Program, a weekly Book Club and ongoing speakers on a variety of topics such as real estate, and personal finances.

#### *5. Economic Conditions*

Although not readily apparent, this is a very influential variable. Especially because the library depends on State funding, it is directly affected by the fluctuation in the State's funding pool. Hence, services offered by the library are also directly dependent on economic conditions. At SBPL, I noticed that the book drop was in a deteriorated condition where the flap that covers the drop is missing. On a rainy day this may cause the returned books to get wet and damaged. Since this is a rather visceral issue, I can theorize that the failure to get this problem corrected could be in direct correlation to the administration of the scarce funds the library has secured, with funds perhaps being allocated to more vital issues. Moreover, the library has no parking of its own and users are very dependant on street parking. Lack of parking is also part of the reason the library is raising funds for a new library building on a new site.

#### *6. Technology*

In this electronic age, it is a must for a library to offer a wide array of electronic services to its community. SBPL offers books on tape, CD-ROMS, movies, eight computer stations with internet access, printing services, and electronic catalogs. Obviously, maintaining all this electronic equipment can be rather costly to the library which in turn affects how its administration manages its funding.

### *7. Socio-cultural Factors*

Last but not least, I couldn't help but notice that all reference staff is of white race despite the demographic figures that reflect a population that is 53.1% non-white (MTC & ABAG, 2000, City of San Bruno Census section). I believe that to truly reach out to such a diverse community, the library should employ a more diverse staff. For example, as I seated to observe the library, a lady of Hispanic descent tried to make herself understood by the reference staff. The reference librarian did not speak Spanish and consequently was not able to serve this one member of the community.

### ***Internal Environmental Variables***

The internal environment influences planning, administration, and change just as much as the external one. McNamara (2000, What is Culture? Section, ¶ 1) stated that "(...) organizational culture is the personality of the organization. Culture is comprised of the assumptions, values, norms and tangible signs (artifacts) of organization members and their behaviors."

#### *1. Environment and Setting*

Right away I noticed that SBPL has a welcoming casual and cozy atmosphere much like the city block in which it resides where several city public services are also located. My expectations of finding an intimate friendly community setting were met. The librarians are not intimidating and library users seem to know them all by name! The library is small but maximizes use of whatever space it has. For example, I noticed that free classes are organized one after the other, rather than at the same time, to be able to use the only meeting space available.

#### *2. Funding*

Funding seems to be an issue as several pamphlets suggest. I deduced that the library location and rather small size are direct consequences of the little funding the library has.

### *3. Staff and Interaction*

The staff is very cordial and helpful to the library users knowing a lot of them by name. The staff seemed to get along well as I overheard a few jokes being told among them. I gathered that seniority is highly valued at the library. The younger less experienced staff constantly requested and received a lot of input from the senior employees, who appeared to know precisely what to do in every instance.

### *4. Organizational Structure*

From hearing employees interact with each other and by reading the announcement board where vacant positions are posted, I gathered the following data regarding the library's organizational structure seems to work the following way. The library is led by a Director who directly supervises at least two distinct teams: an Access team in charge of circulation, document delivery, interlibrary loans and reserves, and an Information Services team in charge of reference services, microfilm, periodicals, technology, and classes. There are also a handful of volunteers, whom I gathered to belong to the Friends of the Library program who help organize and lead some of the free classes as well as the Adult Literacy program.

### *5. Constituents and Library Services*

At the time I visited the library, the library was bustling with activity with a lot of users from different backgrounds, ethnicity, and social status.

The library services offered are somewhat congruent with the population the library serves with the concentration being on family and children's programs. Nonetheless the library also neglects an increasing segment of the constituency. For instance, I noticed that there were no programs in place geared towards Hispanic or Asians or any other ethnic groups. Moreover, there was no staff that could help any of these constituents that do not speak English (refer to my previous

observation under external Socio-Cultural Factors). Ironically, these groups constitute the majority of the population of the city of San Bruno and accounted for a notable percentage of library users on the day I visited.

I immediately remembered Drucker's implication that the wide variety of contradictory constituencies affects the management of a non-profit organization. Barring assumptions, which I tend not to do, this exercise was only based on observations so I could only form opinions based on what I witnessed. Some of the funding the library receives comes from San Bruno's wealthy parents groups as evidenced by the deferential treatment extended to some visitors of an obvious wealthier background. Evidently these groups' needs are being prioritized and met by the library in the form of parent and teacher, and children programs. In contrast, the less affluent segment of the population comprised by the ethnic working class is being underserved. These two very dissimilar constituencies have then affected the administration of the library in that they have influenced the management of programs offered by the library.

### *Conclusion*

Being a public non-profit agency, a library is in a unique position to serve its constituency. In order to serve that purpose, the library must effectively manage its resources by tailoring them to the community it serves. However, there are many environmental factors of both external and internal nature that can influence and change the way the library operates.

Effective management then, would have to be based on devising a unique strategic plan that encourages "(...) a holistic, as opposed to an atomistic, viewpoint" (Gruber, 1982, p.16), fully evaluating and accounting for all the different variables that can affect the organizations' mission fulfillment.

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