

Ten Years of Change in Russia and its Effect on Libraries

by GALINA KISLOVSKAYA

It is sure the custom while speaking about Russia to resort to wordings that have the evidence of common words. Still analysis is needed to check out to what extend they are correct.

One of these wordings is backwardness of librarianship in Russia and its bad management.

In general it seems that apparently nothing could be said against that, everything is correct. If it were not the circumstances under which a today's Russian librarian works and lives, circumstances that are entirely abnormal from the point of view of a western librarian, circumstances that lay obstacles to ANY activity as such.

This may seem a paradox but sometimes I think that Russian libraries had to endure a long and quite a severe shock to start reassessing their basic services, organizational charts, staff composition, attitude to state allocations and fund raising - actually everything which is embodied in the word „management.”

Ten years ago when changes were introduced into Russian reality none of us anticipated that since then we were doomed to manage under force majeure circumstances.

Latest developments in Russia do not leave much optimism for quick recovery from an economic crisis and this sad truth volens nolens had to be accepted by those who have connected their lives with Russia.

I am not intending to go into reminiscences of how the economic situation was developing from bad to worse over this last decade or to give just the gist of the history of Russian librarianship in the pertinent period. What I am intending to do is to reveal moments most important for comprehension of the subject matter of this report. These moments, chosen not at random, but in the light of their stimulating importance, will be managerial issues and the role of a library administrator in the context of an extremely tough economic situation.

At the end of 80-ies the conflict between the so called „weepers”, i.e. library managers who blame external forces, namely the state, for all the bad that happened in their institutions, and „doers”, i.e. those who think that answers to many questions should be found within their institution, was not so tangible because, on the one hand, 'doers were only a few and their voice was suppressed by that of „weepers”'. On the other hand, the economic situation was bad but not so bad as to treat this conflict as one of the crucial ones.

By mid 90-ies the conflict displayed itself quite vividly: those library managers, who understood that alongside with demanding allocations from the state one should also find resources within an organization, around it and should not cherish vain hopes for the serious state support, grew in quantity. Libraries administered by such managers so distinctly went away from settled norms that aroused both secret and open hostility from conservative library directors.

By the end of 90-ies a conflict between weepers and doers has run low. Cruel necessity has left no choice but to accept the credo of doers. At present the difference between these groups of managers is only in their abilities not just help their libraries to survive, but also to develop.

Current economic reality gave birth to many a strange mutations and hybrids. One can meet among library directors somebody with old fashioned economic outlook, with nostalgia over socialist order and yet absolutely adequate to the market in their everyday activity and quite resolute in reforming the life of their libraries. Somebody told that this is a classical backwardness of consciousness from swift movement of reality and that there is nothing bad about this: eyes are afraid of but hands are doing.

However it is also clear that it is not this social hybrid who is the hero of our time, but the one who passed the Rubicon of library reforms - staff cuttings, restructuring and so on and so forth. His or her main merit is the ability to transform circumstances into possibilities.

Let me briefly list main bench marks for successful library management.

1. One has to compete at least mentally with western libraries. The winner will be the one who during most difficult times will do its best to build into international librarianship, who will be comparing his library not with his fellow sufferer but with a prosperous western library, who will not be following a principle „Library Y is even worse”. The main thing in this virtual competition with western libraries - to really improve the quality of service. We in Russia have to understand that the epoch of an unassuming user has come to an end. Openness to a world has done its part: a user has enjoyed the fruits of a western service and is quite capable to distinguish it from a soviet one.

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2. Russian libraries have to learn working in close cooperation.
3. Cruel deficit of resources has to whip up processes of restructuring. It is necessary for releasing resources and investing them into new services and technology.

Not very long ago Gaidar - one of the work superintendents of perestroika - made a statement that „under conditions of financial crash a good variant of rescuing the situation in principle does not exist, there are only bad and disgusting ones”.

Rescuing a situation in Russian libraries can hardly develop according to a different scenario.

But I highlight it once again that Russian library directors do not surrender. The difference is in the different individual abilities to withstand the tough times or you may say it in a different way: in individual managerial skills.

What is the general financial background against which some libraries became leaders, some are lagging behind?

1. Major federal libraries among which Russian State Library, Russian National Library, Russian State Historical Library, Library for Foreign Literature do receive 100 % salary budget at more or less regular basis. Much worse is the situation in regional research libraries where salary is being delayed sometimes 2, 3, 4 months. Federal research libraries are under the parent body of the Ministry of Culture of Russia whereas regional ones are financed by local authorities. Therefore differences are so tangible from region to region.
2. Allocations for utility services like heat, electricity, cold and hot water, for telecommunication, security are not subsidized regularly and in full volume. It is not a rare case when even federal libraries are switched off distant telephone lines, electricity, heat.
3. Acquisition and purchase of computer equipment is financed but very poorly.
4. Telephone and telecommunication lines, building maintenance, acquisition and preservation programs, stationary, business trips, training, equipment, mailing expenditures are paid by libraries themselves from revenues generated from different sort of services and fund-raising activity.

5. In regional libraries there exists a complicated system of mutual payments between local organizations which is not based on normal bank transfer operations.

Stabilization of deterioration - that's how the current economic climate could be qualified. But an impression of a complete paralysis is a wrong one. We, librarians, have never been as active, resourceful and enterprising as now. The last decade proved to be short in time but very intensive in results.

Of course, you can take these revelations for mere declaration, the more so when the last year report of a colleague from the Netherlands showed quite an opposite picture in a St. Petersburg University Library.

In a way my report is sort of antithesis. Actually a report on the situation in St. Petersburg is yet another illustration of the myth of pure economic reasons of unsatisfactory performance. And a vast majority of Russian libraries do understand this.

There is no better way of proving the truth than to give an example. Of course, my example is my library - the All Russia State Library for Foreign Literature named after Margarita Rudomino or simply the LFL - an abbreviation to which I will later refer not once.

The LFL is one of the nine federal libraries governed by the Ministry of Culture of Russia. It has a dual nature of a public and research library. The LFL's collection of 5 million items in 140 foreign languages has been gathered within 76 years. Within the collection development policy priority has always been given to philological disciplines like literary criticism, linguistics, methodology of teaching foreign languages. The collection is particularly strong in foreign fiction, children's literature, arts, library and information science abroad, theology. Liberal arts is the general scope of our collection development. The LFL is fully automated, gives broad access to INTERNET resources in all its reading halls.

The number of users per day is up to 1,300.

Annual circulation is about 2,000,000 documents.

And now let's make a quick glance at the budget.

It is quite obvious that state allocations let but only partially support the LFL's activity and significant efforts are required to maintain saturation and intensity of the library's life which have been always the attribute of a Russian cultural life

One of the leading principles from the end of 80-ies has been constant change, the other principle being following our mission statement which was formulated at about the same time. I remember ardent discussions about the

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concept of development of the library, about linking traditions with new strategies, about new collection development policy in connection with new reality, about the status of the library as of public or research nature. Then none of us knew any management theory. We did intuitively what had to be done. And the mission statement formulated in late 80-ies with involvement of the entire staff is still valid, although the LFL regularly adjusts its annual strategy in accordance with changes in the environment being lead by another principle - common sense.

Our mission statement is as simple as that:

The LFL is a public and research library that is bridging Russian and foreign cultures.

Having articulated the mission statement I will shortly list other basic principles that we learnt as we got along and which guided us through years and more and more complex reality:

1. Training of staff;
2. Rewarding staff;
3. Open communication;
4. Getting results;
5. Outreaching;
6. Setting challenging goals and projects;
7. Flexibility of structure.

1. Training of staff

I put training at the very top of the list quite intentionally. To keep the pace of a leader in the field - and we are as ambitious as that-we have to regularly train staff. In-house training and training in other institutions in Russia and abroad helps to create a challenging atmosphere.

2. Rewarding staff

We try to hire the very best people in the field. And we do our best to keep them working in the library. The working pool for those who know foreign languages has been always wide. We still loose trained staff from time to time since we cannot compete with private sector. But did our best to reach the highest level of salaries in Russian libraries paying extra salaries. For example, since our priority for a number of years has been introduction of new

technologies we have been paying our computer specialists a salary higher than that of a Director and his deputies - a unique practice in Russian libraries. Another manifestation of this principle is giving a chance for quite a big team to attend IFLA conferences - the fact that always surprises our western colleagues. Yes we do treat participation in IFLA conferences as training and a reward for the best of the staff. None of our staff can afford going abroad at their own, that is why we try to motivate them in this specific way.

3. Open communication

This is fundamental. To convert problems into manageable tasks we always discuss them in working groups. We set up a system of Boards to cope with financial problems and tasks related to collection development, preservation and automation. For example, financial Board, consisting of senior managers, meets at an interval of two weeks to articulate and approve short term financial policy and to check whether decisions taken at a previous meeting were fulfilled.. Nobody including a Director is allowed to violate decisions fixed in minutes of the Board. If there is an urgent necessity the Board meets on the spot.

Of course these meetings are not the only ones. For example my everyday meetings with middle managers are a part of my daily activity and very often these ad hoc meetings are dedicated to figuring out how a particular task can be fulfilled at a low cost but with a required level of quality. These daily brief meetings also help not only to locate the problem, find its cause and settle it in time, but also train people to count, to assess action in figures.

Regrettably top administrators very often get only an idea of what is really happening on below levels which is very dangerous because successful management is based on solid facts. Therefore the doors of senior managers' offices are open for the staff at any time. The key point is that no one is afraid to talk during meetings. This is our greatest achievement partially explained by the fact that all senior managers including a Director and his deputies spent almost 20 years in the LFL. We indeed managed to create special institutional culture - we share a home in the library, we take a pride that we work in the LFL.

4. Getting results

Results are an indispensable component of good management. And a sense of accomplishment is very stimulating in itself.

When at the beginning of 90-ies we opened first the doors of the French Cultural Center, then those of the British Council and American Center under the roof of the library we realized that we could not leave the library looking like a bad patchwork: some areas newly refurbished others looking rather shabby in the light of all the renovations that had already taken place. So we were determined to renovate all reading and staff areas at the same standard as our cultural centers. We almost have completed the job although within these years that we step by step renovated the library there was severe criticism on our refurbishment expenditures. But behind that seemingly crazy idea to renovate the library with its 25,000 square meters up to western standards without any financial support from the state there was a wish to raise self - dignity of our users. Because it really matters whether you work in a shabby soviet dwelling or a modern facility. We proved that we can do this.

I do not deny that for a westerner it may not seem an accomplishment: what a surprise to renovate the building? even if you do not cut the services or the production scale in the cataloguing department. But we are very proud that we managed to create a warm and prosperous atmosphere despite depression deepening more and more.

Another quite tangible result was weeding of the collections which may serve a vivid example of applying project management methodology in planning. There were two main reasons for discarding items from the collection: new collection development policy adjusted to the mission statement and dramatic lack of space. At the time when we scheduled a plan for subject bibliographers, cataloguers and processing department staff allocations for new acquisitions significantly dropped, so we took advantage of the situation and made weeding a priority for almost 3 years. This project enabled us to find place for new acquisitions for another 10 years.

5. Outreaching

I will briefly remind you that our mission statement says that the LFL is a two-way bridge between foreign and Russian cultures. Building a showplace of a modern library we wanted other libraries share our achievements. We run endless tours in the library not only for provincial librarians but also for representatives of local authorities, we organize training sessions where we disseminate information on foreign librarianship. Being IFLA clearing house we recruit new members into it. In 1993 we started IFLA recruitment campaign with 12 representatives from provincial libraries. Now IFLA registers about 200 participants from all over Russia. All our professional contacts with foreign institutions are at the disposal of our colleagues. Being

aware of the difficulties in the regions we fund raise in order to run training seminars in remote cities. Our movements across Russia are not hectic: there are some focal points into which we invest our expertise and with which we establish true partnership that helps us to work on logistically difficult projects.

6. *Setting challenging goals*

There is a good Russian saying: „The one who is not taking risk does not drinks champaign”.

A mere enumeration of projects in which the LFL is currently involved speaks for itself:

- Restitution of displayed library collections;
- Running IFLA PAC regional center for Eastern Europe and CIS;
- Research in application of UNICODE in processing of library materials;
- Retroconversion of card catalogues on the basis of an original approach designed by a Russian company;
- Creation of a school of continuing education in librarianship named „Rudomino”;
- Setting up a public law library within the LFL;
- Elaboration of the cooperative program of distant education based on digitization of audiocourses and their transmittion via INTERNET;
- Participation in working out and implementation of a National Preservation Program;
- Working as a national agency for EROMM.

We stopped elaborating long-range plans. It does not mean that we do not have vision for future great projects. But the financial situation is so unstable and unpredictable that we decided not to agonize over detailed long term plans.

Project management has become an approach tested over years of instability.

7. *Flexibility of structure.*

There were 702 official occupied positions in the LFL at the beginning of a transition period.

Nowadays it is 480 among which professional librarians and - technical staff.

Cutting down the number of staff slowly but steadily has been our goal for years and still is.

As new dimensions emerge we change the organizational chart i.e. we create new divisions (for example religious department, law library) or extend the already existing ones (automation department) or which is more preferable we set up temporary project groups (EROMM).

I can hardly believe that in the coming years fundamental management theories will significantly change. We in Russia, and to be more precise in a Russian library, do not invent new one as well. We just make our own LFL's blending of theories X, Y and Japanese and that is our only salvation.

Galina Kislovskaya
Library for Foreign Literature
Moscow, Russia
gkislov@libfl.msk.su