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## **Managing Change: Socratic Wisdom and 30 Years in the Trenches**

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### **Preface**

As some of you probably know, I spent more than a year and a half at the American Farm School helping, in any small way I could, to set up a combined high school and college library. This was one of the signal experiences of my life, and it infused me with a life-long love of Greece and my many Greek friends. Among these friends, one stands out, and her name is Mrs. Vicki Syroglou-Bouki, who is the Head Librarian at the Dimitri and Aliko Perrotis Library at the Farm School. It is clear to me that without Mrs. Syroglou-Bouki, the Perrotis Library would never have become a reality. I will always be thankful for her hospitality, friendship and guidance. She is, indeed, a wise and wonderful woman.

## **Socratic Dicta**

Everyone in this room probably knows the early Socratic dialogues – Euthyphro, Apology, Crito - in which Socrates is indicted, tried and convicted of being impious, of being immoral. These charges are, of course, false, and it is in the dialogues that Socrates is shown to be a brilliant orator and the most moral of all men.

But this is all beside the point for this brief talk. The point, here, is to show how Socrates can be a guide to managing change.

Let me read you a short passage from the Apology.

Socrates:

I came to see that, though a great many persons, and most of all he himself, thought that he was wise, yet he was not wise . . . so when I went away, I thought to myself, "I am wiser than this man: neither of us knows anything that is really worth knowing, but he thinks that he has knowledge when he has not, while I, having no knowledge, do not think that I have. I seem, at any rate, to be a little wiser than he is on this point: I do not think that I know what I do not know."

I tell you that no greater good can happen to a man than to discuss human excellence every day and the other matters about which you have heard me arguing and examining myself and others, and that an unexamined life is not worth living. (Plato's Apology)

## **Introduction**

Over the years, I have been asked often what the single most important factor was in helping me to become a successful library director and to be able to manage change well. The answer that always comes to me each time is: my philosophical training. More specifically, it was my study of Plato's early dialogues. It is the two Socratic dicta above – those of humility and examination, both of which are the very foundation of early Platonic thought, that have helped me blend my two professions - librarianship and philosophy, and to be a successful library director. What is most important in managing change is to know when you do not know and to keep an open mind. In effect, remain a bit humble and always examine your own revered truths.

And while I am on the subject of library directors, I think that the second most important factor in becoming a good library director is experience in library work. My thirty years in the trenches have served me well. Above and beyond being a director, I have been in charge of collection development, acquisitions, and serials, as well as working in

reference and circulation. There is no substitute for knowing how a library works from the ground up.

(At this point I should say a word or two about library school. I really do not mean to exclude the importance of good library school training. I went to the University of Illinois, and spent almost two years at the University library school. I learned a lot of theory, which I think is absolutely vital to a library career, and this theory has always stood me in good stead. Further, a graduate library degree can also serve as the key to the executive locker room. Without graduate training, faculty status becomes almost impossible, and the official position of the American Library Association is that librarians should have faculty status. As most of you probably know, many library directors in the US have a graduate degree in a subject areas as well as the MLS.)

I suspect that many librarians and library directors are not well-suited for managing change. It is all too easy to become ingrained in our ways of doing things. And it is safe. On the other hand, all of us must realize that managing change well in today's library environment is vital because we live in an era of rapid change. Socrates has always been one of my mentors in this task. As a five-time library director, I have seen more than my fair share of change, and I can tell you that it is most often rewarding and always difficult.

Managing change well is probably the single most important characteristic of good librarians. To not change in this day and age is to fall behind. Those of us with a few years under our belt remember a library environment before computers. When I went to library school at the University of Illinois in the mid-seventies, everything was done manually. Computers were beginning to come upon the scene, but I think that very few librarians of that era could begin to understand just how profound an effect they would have.

My remarks that follow can be divided into three parts: the Socratic dicta, how to manage change and some examples that have faced me as a librarian.

## **Part I** Socratic dicta explained

Just what do the two Socratic principles of humility and self-examination come to? In the two quotations above, Socrates is trying to convey to the people of Athens that human wisdom does not really amount to very much, and thus, it is best not to make too much of it. From this it follows that humility, in the Socratic sense, is the best attitude to take toward wisdom. The wise wo/man is the wo/man who knows that s/he does not know. Conversely, it might be argued that the wise wo/man also knows when s/he does know.

Given this context of wisdom, one must keep examining and having a dialogue, both with oneself and others, in order to search for whatever wisdom is available. And obviously the only way to keep up the search is to be open minded, to be open to change, to be open to what others have to say.

As you can probably see quite clearly, the two dicta are inter-related. If one is to continue the process of examination, then one must also be humble, in the Socratic sense. In other words, if you think that you know more than you do, then examination is not going to occur. Examination requires a certain level of Socratic humility, i.e., knowing when one does not know.

## **Part II** Managing change

If one is to take Socrates seriously, and I do, then one has to admit to a certain level of humility in what one knows. Managing change often demonstrates just how little one does know and the necessity for continual examination.

What follows below is what I have learned from reading philosophy and from thirty years in the library trenches. I am going to list the principles of managing change that have stood the test of time for me. These principles listed below all follow, I would argue, from Socratic dicta, the two first principles, of humility and examination.

1. Have vision - Probably the best way to begin the process of managing change is to have your own vision and find ways share it with others. But remember your limitations and involve as many staff as possible. (examination)

(You might ask where vision comes from, and I would argue that it comes from both knowledge and experience. Librarians need to keep up with the literature, to attend workshops and conferences and basically try to keep learning throughout their careers. Obviously, one can learn only if one has an open mind. Closed minds lead to certainties and truths which are much too easy and often wrong.)

2. Be democratic – Even if you believe that you are all knowing, your staff will keep you honest. Knowledge can come from the least likely sources. (humility)

(Once when I was involved in building a new library building, I had the idea that all staff members should be invited to a meeting where the building plans would be reviewed. Every thing was going along well, when all of a sudden heads turned to hear a faint voice coming from the back of the room. It was one of the custodians who would be taking care of the new library, and she asked me and the architect where the janitors' closets were. To be honest, we had left them out entirely...)

3. Examine everything – Look at all the possible alternatives. (examination)

4. Maintain dialogue – Maintain a dialogue with your staff and with colleagues. Remember that others often have better ideas than you do. (humility and examination)
5. Learn from others – Again, this comes from open dialogue with your own staff and from others in the profession. (humility and examination)
6. Learn from your own mistakes – Rather than repeat your mistakes, learn from them. This is what the truly wise person does. Further, I might argue that the best way to avoid mistakes is to consult with others. (humility and examination)
7. Give your staff credit - Always let your staff take the credit for good ideas. This will empower them and keep the ideas flowing. There is nothing worse than a manager who always takes credit for good ideas and, thus, beats his or her staff continually into the ground. (humility)
8. Take the blame - Always take the blame yourself for things that do not work out. Again, this empowers staff, and since you are in charge, it really was your fault. Above, I said that there is nothing worse than a manager who always takes credit for good ideas, but if there is, it is the manager who always blames staff when things go wrong. (humility)
9. Don't pass the buck – If a decision has to be made, after all of the input has been taken into account, be willing to make it. (humility)

(The American President, Harry Truman, had two plaques on his desk. The first one is famous. It said: “The Buck Stops here.” The second is much less well known. It said: “Never take credit for a good idea.”)

10. Be humble – Be humble in the sense that you know that you do not know everything. This kind of Socratic humility is different from the modern sense of the word, which is used to imply that one is quiet and meek. (humility)
11. Be open-minded - Be willing to be open-minded and engage openly in disagreements. If you have a good idea, be willing to fight for it, but also be willing to give it up if others show you the error of your ways. And be able to put the shoe on the other foot. If someone else has a good idea, learn from it. (humility and examination)

In summary, I would argue that the best way to effect change is to have vision and then to share it, to involve, democratically, as many library staff as possible. Your staff will help keep you honest, and open discussion will often lead to a revised vision. It has often been my experience that group dialogue results in positive change. The examination of life and the workplace involves public dialogue, a dialogue that leads to a better way of doing things. The alternative is to impose from the top down, assuming that one knows all, and this rarely, if ever, works well. So, continual examination is vital; it is a necessity.

But examination can occur only with a melieu where the change manager is humble, in the Socratic sense. A manager who already knows the answer is not going to be very good at examining.

### **Part III** Examples of change I have faced and helped to implement in my career

Many of the changes wrought over the last thirty or forty years in the US are now taken for granted, but each of these changes required great vision, the sharing of this vision and a fair amount of disagreement.

Almost every library director in the US has had to deal with the changes that I am going to briefly discuss below.

#### 1. Proactive professional organizations (ALA)

The American Library Association is an extremely proactive professional organization. It argues for the professionalism and the rights of all US librarians. Among the issues that ALA has tackled over the years is censorship, rights of gay and lesbian librarians and African-American librarians, rights of the disabled to use libraries. What used to be a pretty passive organization is now on the cutting edge of library issues, as well as those confronting society.

#### 2. Inventory control systems

These systems are more commonly known as integrated library systems (ILS') and are now installed in most academic libraries. Card Catalogs have pretty much been disposed of, as have kardexes used to check in periodicals. Many libraries also use the ILS' for acquisitions and fund accounting. Thus, ILS' in a very short space of time have become the central inventory control systems for libraries, allowing for one-stop shopping.

### 3. Library utilities (OCLC, Neline, Palinet, etc.)

OCLC and various library utilities did not appear on the scene until the early 1970's. Most academic libraries in the US now belong to one utility or another, and they use these utilities for a variety of purposes, including cataloging, interlibrary loan, purchase of electronic resources, purchase of hardware and software, etc. Before the advent of these utilities, each library had to pretty much go it alone.

### 4. Library of Congress

As the name implies, the Library of Congress is the library for the US Congress. But it is also the national library, and this latter was and is a hard fought battle. I expect that there will always be a tug of war between libraries and the Congress for the attention of LC, but the US library community is now a key player. This was not always the case.

### 5. Professional library master's degrees

The terminal library degree in the US up through the 1940's was a bachelor's degree. It was not until 1975 that the Association of College and Research Libraries declared that the master's degree in library science was the appropriate terminal degree for a librarian.

### 6. Faculty status for librarians

The Association of College and Research Libraries of the ALA has guidelines ("Joint Statement on Faculty Status of College and University Librarians," originally drafted in 1972) that propose that librarians at Colleges and Universities be given faculty status if they function in ways similar to faculty. Many colleges and universities now grant librarians faculty status, and you can imagine that this was not an easily won battle.

### 7. Digitization

This is still a controversial concept in the American library world, though it is gaining more acceptance every day. Commercial vendors, and some libraries (e.g., Project Muse) have stepped in to digitize periodicals. Many libraries now have larger periodical collections online than they do in print. These are all indexed and can be downloaded and printed with great ease, and from any location on campus or off. Many books have been digitized, too, and the number is increasing every day. With the increasing numbers of students who are getting degrees through distance learning, this is no longer a luxury.

Archives and other collections held by individual libraries are also now being digitized. There are a number of large digitization projects going on both in the US and the EU.

## 8. Collection Development

Early in my career, I became the Assistant Director for Collection Development at the University of New Mexico. Faculty selection of all materials except for those in reference was pretty much the name of the game. Slowly but surely librarians have come to the fore, now accounting for a goodly portion of all materials selected for library collections.

Many years ago, I gave a paper at an ALA Annual Conference. I called the paper "Tilting at Windmills" (Don Quixote), and in it argued that librarians could select library materials as well as, if not better, than most faculty. The evidence was, and still is, that materials selected by librarians is more heavily used than that selected by faculty.

## 9. Management styles

When I first started my career, management styles were very autocratic, and now they are democratic. There is a story about Robert Downes, the famous American library director, not allowing his staff to be seen in public eating, though he allowed himself the daily luxury of passing through the catalog area at Illinois with a cup of coffee in his hands.

Present day management is more in the vein of participatory democracy where the input of all staff is expected and valued.

## **Summary**

So what have I argued in this paper. I have meant to say that change managers, and all librarians are change managers today, have to continually examine themselves and others for the best answers to the complex questions and challenges that confront librarians in the current information environment. And, in order to be able to examine, a librarian must be able to wear a bit of Socratic humility, which means to know when one does not know and also when one does.

The two Socratic dicta, then, have stood me in good stead in a library career that has arguably spanned the four decades of librarianship that have seen the most change that has ever occurred in the library profession.