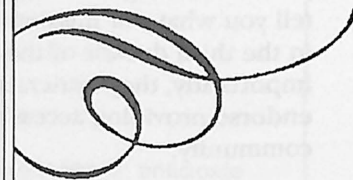


CONSTANCY OF PURPOSE, AS LEARNED AND USED IN ONE INDIANA PUBLIC LIBRARY

by Mary Hall



"I have no idea what they're talking about!" was my panicked thought upon first hearing about the concept of Constancy of Purpose during a Continuous Improvement session. When the discussion deepened and continued into an analysis of the role of Mission, Vision, and Values in organizations, I groaned to myself. I was familiar with the concepts of Mission and Vision statements, of course, but privately wondered how they could be practical. Learning these theories was fine, but what was their practical use, really? And why spend valuable time creating a vision that can never be attained? Isn't it all just easy fodder for a Dilbert cartoon?

That internal dialogue took place five years ago. Now these same concepts are not only integral to operations in our medium-size public library, but also in my personal and professional life. I am now a firm believer in the meaning and direction that are generated by a commitment to Constancy of Purpose. However, lest you too be groaning to yourself and beginning to turn this page, be reassured that this will be indeed be a practical (and brief) example of these concepts at work in one library. Indeed, a mountain-sized number of in-depth books and articles have already been published on this topic, and I will not attempt to add to it, nor rehash the discussion. (See *Further Reading*, below.)

Constancy of purpose was a concept coined by W. Edwards Deming, who helped revolutionize Japanese manufacturing by improving processes so that workers could create quality. The first of his Fourteen Points mandated the creation of constancy of purpose for long term quality. He insisted that leaders ask "What are we doing?" and "Why are we doing it?" He held leaders accountable for ensuring that employees understand the organization's Mission, Vision, and Values. This is accomplished by incorporating this Constancy of Purpose throughout the life of the organization. Mission provides a daily guide and tool. Vision, or Aim, is the shared, long-term picture of what the organization strives to become. Values are guiding principles that describe what the organization will not violate.

As always, the difficulty with noble concepts lies in implementing them *throughout* the organization with the help of a guiding coalition of staff members. Otherwise, the most effective ideas and ideals will remain only at the top management level. Meanwhile, the rest of the workers may be off working hard and doing their best, but headed in a totally different direction.

As part of our participation in the Continuous Improvement Project, we 'learned by doing,' gaining understanding about concepts by putting them actively to work in our own organization. To begin our work on Constancy of Purpose, we initiated a discussion among our Library staff about values. All staff members met in interdepartmental sessions to discuss and select three values to guide our actions. These values would serve to hold all staff accountable toward Library customers as well as to other staff. The top-ranked values were: being honest, courteous, and open-minded.

At the time of the Continuous Improvement wrap-up, our Library was preparing for a remodeling project that would create a dramatic shift in service delivery. Our Carnegie building's existing addition would soon be reconfigured to house a new Circulation area and computer lab. Current Checkout areas on both the Adult and Children's/Young Adult floors would be reconfigured into Reference areas to facilitate more confidential and personalized service. The single Circulation point would be adjacent to a newly configured, more accessible main entrance and would serve all visitors. (Readers familiar with Carnegie Library buildings will understand the constant reworking necessary to meet changing needs, as well as the community's loyalty to the building itself.)

To staff this new Circulation area, some staff positions from Adult Services, Children's/Young Adult Services, and our computer lab/switchboard were being combined to create a new department, Circulation Services. Everyone involved felt some trepidation about these upcoming dramatic changes. Not only were staff members working with 'new' people, they would be

working in very different ways, with more visibility and responsibility. In addition, the public would be required to use only the new entrance and would doubtless express their feelings about the change. Therefore, with the guidance of the Continuous Improvement leadership team, we decided to face all these changes proactively and involve all of the new team members in creating a positive approach. Over the next two months, this new Circulation team met with consultant Denise Shockley, who guided us in developing a shared vision for this service.

To begin to create a cohesive unit, we agreed on group norms, which included respect for all ideas and participation by every person. The new group discussed how customers and staff would interact in this space and how the area would look, feel, and function. The group brainstormed to create a list of descriptive words, such as comfortable, busy, cheerful, etc. These were sorted into categories such as 'atmosphere,' 'physical,' 'interactions,' and distributed for study. Each person then privately wrote a few sentences describing their personal vision of the future Circulation area and how it would function. We shared and discussed these personal visions as a group and from them found consensus in this shared vision for the newly-formed Circulation Services:

...A welcoming space that is comfortable for both the staff and the public. Patrons are confident in our pleasant and knowledgeable staff, who efficiently serve the public.

Each step of this process helped to create a team, and built energy and interest. Soon excitement began to replace anxiety.

The group also worked with the Values that had already been accepted by the staff as a whole. To make them more personal to the new Circulation Services, the group added explanatory sentences.

Honest: We feel trusted as individuals, and we are honest with our co-workers and the public.

Courteous: We treat co-workers and the public with kindness and respect.

Open-minded: We are accepting of people and receptive to new ideas and changes.

In order to increase the impact of Constancy of Purpose on our entire organization, the Library adopted a new Mission and Vision. While our Library already had a mission statement when we began the Continuous Improvement Project, it needed to be updated. With the leadership and guidance of Library Board members, these Mission and Vision Statements were developed.

Mission: The Bedford Public Library is committed to improving the quality of life for its customers by providing equal access to services, resources, and information.

Vision: The Bedford Public Library will be a highly valued resource that establishes and promotes long-term relationships with the community.

These statements, while brief and understandable, provide both short-term direction and wide-open possibilities for long-term development. They are not merely words on our website; they are used daily throughout our organization. Staff at any level can look to our Constancy of Purpose for guidance in making a decision. Programs and services are planned, developed, and evaluated against these tools. Decisions are made and relationships with individual customers are shaped by our Mission and Vision. They provide energy for action today, as well as a direction for the future.

This year, the Library is developing our first-ever branch location. Constancy of Purpose has helped bring this about, and it will help guide us throughout the process. As we prepare to serve our community in a new way, our Constancy of Purpose provides a foundation that will guide and support our plans over the long term.

FURTHER READING

As mentioned above, thousands of inspiring books discuss these concepts for organizational and personal development. These are just a few that I've found helpful.

Covey, Stephen R. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Fireside, 1990.

Loer, Jim, and Tony Schwartz. *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, is the Key to Performance and Personal Renewal*. New York: Free P, 2003.

Scherkenbach, William W., and W. Edwards Deming. *The Deming Route to Quality and Productivity, Road Maps and Roadblocks*. Milwaukee: ASQC Quality P, 1986.

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