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from the editor

By Catherine A. Lemmer



The Best Defense is a Good Offense

"I've always challenged myself and the people who work with me to take new approaches to traditional business challenges, to push the envelope and constantly ask whether our sacred cows are still producing great milk." —Irene Rosenfeld, chairman and CEO, Mondelez International, Inc.

A colleague recently asked me where I preferred living upon learning that my two-résumé family maintains residences in both Chicago and Indianapolis. Deliberately misinterpreting the intent of the question, I replied, "On the tip of an envelope." The status quo has never held much appeal for me; it's why I sometimes get into trouble for causing creative destruction. I like to think out loud, generate ideas, cajole some interested parties into helping bring them to fruition, nurture them for a bit until stable, and then give them to someone else to manage and make their own while I go on to start the process again.

As members of the legal profession, we are challenged on two major fronts. First, technology has profoundly changed, and will continue to change, the practice of law. Second, harsh and, in many cases, vitriolic criticism continues to be leveled at the legal profession for its failure to adequately prepare students for legal practice, deliver high-quality, cost-effective legal services, and equally serve all segments of society. It is reasonable in times of change, distress, and attack to respond defensively. Our greatest challenge may lie in suppressing this natural instinct. My view of our environment may be foolhardy or overly optimistic, but, at this point, it appears that *our best defense may be a good offense*. That is to flip the paradigm; rather than expending our intellectual energies and resources to craft a defense of our past actions in response to our critics, let's go out and create new experiences and opportunities that advance our organizations.

As law librarians, we can and should play a vital role in the design and implementation of these new experiences and opportunities. Given this, I further suggest that now is not the time to wait to be offered a seat at the table. A scary thought for many librarians for a number of reasons!

First, a seat at the table comes with a responsibility to come prepared with opinions and ideas that will require developing new skills and restructuring aspects of our libraries. This will layer on top of our already full professional days. But, as David Lankes reminds us in *The Atlas of New Librarianship*, "Innovation is not a time slot, it is an attitude."

Second, we aren't always comfortable taking responsibility for our own destiny. Our orientation has long been one of symbiotic service; it is a comfortable shoe that we know and like. As Christine Brock wrote in her 1974 *Law Library Journal* article, "Law Libraries and Librarians: A Revisionist History; or More than you ever wanted to know," "Historically, more than any other type of library, the American law library has been bonded to the profession it serves. The development of law, the legal profession, legal education, and government in this country have been controlling factors in both the technical and physical growth of law libraries. This *bondage* has, to a great extent, hampered the development of institutional American law libraries and prevented them from reaching the level of development their potential would have allowed."

Third, librarians are perfectionists at heart. Rarely do we finish a project with a "just good enough" attitude. Change and innovation require that we create within our organizations a culture that permits failure. If our organizations create a culture that allows us the freedom to fail, it will encourage us all to keep tinkering until we get it right . . . well, right at least for that one halcyon moment in time until circumstances change.

Last, we unconsciously project that we haven't earned a seat at the table. Many times we fail to do a good job of claiming credit for our work and the work of our libraries. AALL Past President Jean Wenger once graciously reminded me that it diminishes the value of our work to tell a patron "It's nothing" in response to an expression of appreciation. I carry that important reminder with me at all times.

I urge you to have the courage to push past these and other barriers! A quick skim of the 2015 AALL Annual Meeting's "must-have programming" indicates that many of us are well aware of the need to innovate and rebrand ourselves. It will not be a comfortable process as we evaluate and question every aspect of our libraries and ourselves. In the end, how we design and navigate this transformational rebranding will be determined in part by how we envision ourselves next week, next year, and so on.

Again, I urge you to have the courage to think big! Courage, as Mark Engsborg shared with us in the July issue of *AALL Spectrum*, occurs as often in small, incidental ways as it does in life and death situations. Innovation is within all of us! If you are in need of a supportive shoulder, take David Lankes' advice and create a *crazy idea mailing list* (i.e., that group of colleagues, friends, mentors, or whoever that you can bounce your ideas to for advice and opinion). I've got one and can vouch for its value.

Our libraries and ourselves are works in progress. The comforting thought is that librarians have survived upheavals in the past and will survive again. The discomfort comes in knowing that those past survivals came with deep reflection and change. Our goal should be to have a seat at the table so that we can manage, control, and own our transformation. ■

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