**Information Outlook Column (Jan/Feb. issue)**

**Due Dec. 28, 2011**

**10 ways to make yourself indispensable at your workplace**

*By Stephen Abram*

It doesn’t work 100% of the time but you’ve probably noticed that there are some people that seem to survive every organizational restructuring. In this latest economic downturn we’re seeing layoffs and downsizing on a scale in all sectors that most of us have never seen. As for me, I’ve been through too many to count – survived some and didn’t make it out the other side on others. By some counts there have been over 14 downturns in my professional career since 1978. These swings in the economy have burnished me and, ironically, made me less dependent on employers for my self-worth or finances. The private sector reacts to protect the whole enterprise during the business cycle and, although we shouldn’t take downsizing personally, it’s hard not to! The public sector is arguably experiencing a major downturn with extensive layoffs for the first time in memory for many. I was inspired recently by an article that was shared with me (from Black Enterprise: “10 ways to make yourself indispensable at work”), so I’ve adapted its 10 points for library land, but the original can be read without translation too.

Is the grapevine working overtime in your business, industry, community library, school board or institution? What do the water cooler conversations resemble in your sector – excitement about the future or doom and gloom? Are you seeing terrible budget debates, revenue shortfalls, business disappointments, investment or trust fund losses, or shortfalls in taxation support? What can you do to reduce your chances of layoff? Barring situations of collective bargaining where the rules can be prescribed, there are things you can do and should do precisely when you don’t need it right away.

**Make a plan. Assess your strengths. Define your value, and, most importantly tend to your personal and professional network.**

What tactics can you accomplish that will reduce your personal chances of layoff or prepare you better to shorten your period of unemployment? Remember that this isn’t about protecting the ‘library’ but of communicating your value as a “librarian.” There is a big difference! Here are ten:

1. **Take ownership of all your responsibilities by seeing your role in the context of the entire enterprise and community**. What would you increase as an activity and what would you decrease? Employees that think strategically are more valuable than one-trick ponies.

2. **Take personal responsibility for your professional development and career preparedness**. In difficult economic times no one else will quickly step up to protect you or guide your career. In times of transition, individuals must be proactive and not look to an employer to prepare them for their next job. Indeed training and development budgets are usually one of the first to be reduced or eliminated. You might have to invest your own dollars and time in yourself for e-learning courses, training, association memberships and conferences but, still, fight to get your promised education reimbursements. The enterprise is not your mother and bears no responsibility to your progress. What key specific competency would make your more valuable to your current and prospective employers? Develop it.

3. **Maintain a visibly positive attitude while protecting your job**. It’s far easier for decision-makers to cut a Negative Nellie. You aren’t the only one who’s stressed by the economy. If you see others handling it better, model their behaviours. No one wants to be constantly reminded of the fact that everyone is now doing 2 or 3 jobs and extended effort. . When things seem to pile up and you’re feeling stressed, take a deep breath and think that this is better for your personal physical and mental health. It’ll also allow you to keep wok relationships friendly and positive. Be the colleague people want to have lunch or a coffee with rather than avoid.

4. **Become a Renaissance person**. Yes, this means taking on extra tasks or spending personal time on events that can be great for the office culture – parties, birthdays, charity events, etc. Learn to do new things as other people leave. You gain new skills and you clearly increase your long-term value. You also gain a story about how you learn and adapt for interviews.

5. **Find an important, strategic task that you know how to do better and faster and less expensively than anyone else**. The boss is looking to make changes and ready to hear suggestions. Ask for the challenge and seek any training and coaching. Don’t instantly look for pay or job description changes right away. Prove your value and success first and document that success. Lots of stuff can slip through the cracks in downturns damaging the organization. Be part of the solution and you’ll look like a star. As a corollary, reduce the time spent you’re seen doing clerical or tertiary tasks.

6. **Don't stick your head in the sand**. Trying to hide or be invisible just makes you look valueless and, just like that proverbial ostrich, you’re not fooling anyone. Speak up and talk about your successes. Be excited about the opportunities available. Tell stories about how you helped the organization to make decisions, influenced that organization’s users’, students’, professors’ success in meeting organizational goals. Collect and share testimonials. Encourage others to share your impact on their success with key decision-makers. Seek recognition.

7. **Excel in an area that your boss is weak in**. Think about it. You’re part of a team. If you’re essential to your boss’s or team’s success, you’re safer. If your boss is visionary, be good at detail. If your boss is great at numbers, be good at writing the justification or presenting numbers. If you’re a technical or technology expert, complement your team’s skills. Be the go-to person for something and library research skills certainly offer that positioning.

8. **Become an organization star by being a spokesperson** at community events and professional association meetings like SLA. Tell the library’s stories and communicate the value of your organization to those who can support you. Write and publish and be perceived as an expert with unique and special expertise. Become and be political and use your network to influence your future in a positive manner. Build social equity by doing the same for others. Don’t hide in your organization – the lack of visibility becomes a mountain to climb if you are set free.

9. **Be an effective team player**. Always present a united front and support your boss and the team externally, but internally be independent. Yes, if you disagree with your boss, then learn the correct, private way to provide feedback. Respect your team and give the gift of emotional and work support. And your boss isn’t inhuman either and appreciates some understanding and support too. When the water hole gets smaller at the oasis, everyone starts to look like food. Rise above that behavior. If you hear yourself sounding petty or small, you must stop. Keep the big picture in mind and choose your battles carefully. Technological change usually increases during times of crisis as organizations try to find and invest in efficiency and effectiveness improvements that will allow them to survive and maintain their mandate(s) with less staff. Resistance to technological change late in the process or at implementation is foolhardy. Look for ways to support successful implementations, not derail the change.

10. **Invest in yourself and your career**. Taking training and development courses in your areas of expertise and in management are the best way to stay current in your field and provide added-valued services to your company. And you can meet new contacts and increase your external network. Find cost effective ways to do this through distance education, SLA, and conference attendance. Don’t try to find the time, make the time.

**Bonus**: Don’t fall into the trap of a downward emotional spiral. Stay in touch with friends. Eat out with others. Exercise; see a play or movie; have a real life and seek balance. If you find yourself getting negative or blue too often, seek support from your network. You’ll be a better person for it and thrive.

Indispensability is a positioning in the mind of your organization about you as an *asset*. It is far better to be an asset than to be a *cost*! It is based on your skills and competencies but that is rarely sufficient. You need the patina of stories, personality, experiences, network, and a legacy of good results. Remember that in this instance you are protecting your role as an information professional and librarian, not the library cost-center. You must play the game of personal marketing and organizational politics well and the only way to do that well is to practice it over time. It never happens, and I mean never, that a change, downturn, war, revolution, recession or depression doesn’t open up new opportunities and eventually turns around. The wise keep their eyes, ears and minds open and look to identify new opportunities. The prepared emerge stronger and better over the long run.

“You'll find that you become indispensable by being indispensable.”

This issue’s column was inspired by:

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