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Presentation notes

The current economic situation affects archives and archivists both professionally and personally. Rosemary Flynn and Caryn Radick discuss practical implications of coping with diminished resources without losing spirit. How can we say “no” to overburdening demands, stick to our priorities, and survive in today’s environment?

Since my husband is an economist, the current economy, be it good or bad, is a constant topic of conversation in our household. In the last year, when he does his weekly local radio show or talks to small business owners, he is often asked what can businesses do to weather the current economic down turn. His answer is often to “be smart” and “do what you do best.”

For archivists and other information professionals, really, the message is no different. We need to be smart and do what we do best. However, as managers, how do we do this when working with diminished resources or possibly minimal resources to begin with?

We need to remember the basics of being good managers and leaders.

My answer is perhaps a little simplistic, but as managers of our units, no matter how big the units are, our staff and colleagues look to us for guidance, particularly when times are rough. How we handle ourselves, both professionally and personally, will speak volumes.

Since I want to make sure that you have a resource for when you go back to your organization, I am going to structure the rest of my comments based on the article “Facing the Economic Storm: Navigating RIM Programs Through Hard Times” by Bruce Dearstyne. The article appeared in the March/April 2009 issue of *Information Management* from ARMA International. This is the best of the overview articles I have seen on managing information units during economic crises. And, I think his insights hold true during boom times as well. While the article is written more for records managers, we have a lot we can learn from our colleagues in other information professions.

Dearstyne describes five strategies for records and information management, or RIM, professionals: provide steadfast leadership, let your program’s light shine, pay more attention to people, use imaginative approaches if downsizing is anticipated, and capitalize on new opportunities and plan the program’s future.

Let’s discuss each of these briefly.

Provide steadfast leadership:

To put it simply, you are not just managing, you are leading. As Dearstyne notes, “In times of crisis, people look to the leader to set the tone, instill confidence, chase away fears, and inspire action.”

So, how do you do this? You need “to be involved, visible, engaged, and in charge.” You need to communicate and communicate clearly. Communication is not what you say, it is what people take away from what you say. For example, even when news is bad, like reduced hours or lay-offs are necessary, sharing information rather than allowing rumors to run rampant, will help reduce distractions and allow productivity to remain up.

Let your program’s light shine

In times like this, advocacy is the name of the game. Advocacy has been a hot topic for several years within SAA. But, what are you doing in your own organization? Dearstyne advocates developing, honing, and keeping focus “on a few appropriate advocacy themes before budgetary crises are at the door, and to keep emphasizing them after a crisis hits.” He says that the best RIM programs, and it is not different in archival units, are “visible and assertive, report on what they do, and make sure that satisfied customers understand the need for resources for the helpful RIM services to continue.” How you do this from organization to organization will vary but the message remains the same. You need to toot your own horn and convince others to join you.

Pay more attention to people

When times are tough, people naturally have more worries. Even when jobs are secure in your organization, the jobs of people close to your employees may be in jeopardy. Be ready to provide assurance and honest answers about the welfare of your organization. But also be ready to put on your HR hat. Workplace and personal stress can lead to personnel clashes, low productivity, health problems, and the list goes on. Again, communication is key. Engage your staff, talk through issues, and help keep people focused on what is being done to work through any problems and on maintaining a high-quality program. Also, think creatively about how you can reward workers even when pay raises are not an option.

Use imaginative approaches if downsizing is anticipated

Hopefully, this will not be a problem for you. But, if it is, you must think not only about your employees but also about your program. Unfortunately, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Talk with colleagues in similar institutions to see what they have done and explore different options and scenarios with your boss and other managers in your organization.

If you do need to reduce your staff, make sure you have been effectively documenting employee performance. This is as important when making the case for keeping someone as it is for deciding who may be under-performing and is a natural place for trimming the staff.

You also need to ask, is this a long-term downsizing or something short-term that can be addressed with a reduction of hours.

Also consider how you will continue to offer the services you currently offer with reduced staff or hours. You should have some skeleton plans ready to go at all times in case of emergencies. However, these plans can become the backbone of your new procedures while you address the other aspects of the downsizing.

Capitalize on new opportunities and plan the program's future:

Let's face it. Programs that don't envision a future will rarely survive to have a future. Dearstyne quotes a *BusinessWeek* article saying "History has shown that crisis breed opportunity... Business leaders may have to cut costs to survive 2009, but the smart ones are also out there looking for prospects." We have to do the same. How do we show our relevancy to our parent organizations, our patrons, and our communities? Do we need to change our focus, our methods, maybe even our mission, in order to ensure our continued livelihood? Are there organizational mandates in which we can take an active role? These are only some of the questions that we need to ask ourselves.

I want to close by reading Dearstyne's closing paragraph from the article since I think it so nicely sums up both his comments and my own thoughts during the last several months.

"What ran through the whole New Deal was finding a way to make things work," according to another oral recollection in Terkel's *Hard Times*. That is a useful concluding insight for RIM program managers. They need to maintain solid RIM principles, keep their program's mission in mind, maintain the support for their program and the morale of their staff, and find ways to get the work done. Programs that find creative ways to weather these hard times may well come out stronger in the end and will be in a solid position for the future.

Now, I'm going to turn it over to Caryn.

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