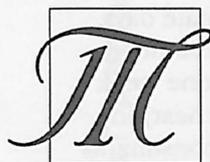
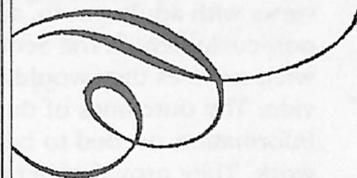


# PROCESS ANALYSIS AND STANDARDIZATION: THE ROAD TO STRATEGIC PLANNING SUCCESS

by David Keeber



Many are the libraries that possess a strategic plan. Sandra Nelson, creator of the Public Library Association's "For Results" methodology is fond of stating that having a strategic plan does not mean that you will have the funds and staff time to implement it. In order to ensure that a plan does not become "shelfware," all aspects of the library's regular work must be examined to find efficiencies and effective processes that allow the staff to gain the time needed to implement new services. It is difficult and unglamorous work that makes the difference between hoped-for change and real progress.

Yet, the rewards are not insignificant as staff begin to realize that problems that they have previously considered "just the way it is" now have solutions. Staff buy-in is always critical to the success of any effort, but when they realize that they are able to find efficiencies, reduce their stress, and allow themselves the time to be creative as they implement new services, the likelihood of success for any strategic plan is much more assured.

Sedona Public Library recently completed a comprehensive project that not only produced a new strategic plan but also taught staff the skills necessary to find the time for its implementation. Working with Sara Laughlin & Associates, Inc., we engaged in a Library Effectiveness Study designed to address both strategic planning and aligning our regular processes with that plan. The effort took six months of planning, six more months to complete and included work by teams composed of staff, volunteers and Board of Trustees members. The result satisfied the Sedona City Council<sup>1</sup> with whom the Library had a contractual obligation for a "staffing study," and has pushed the Library much further forward on the path of its strategic plan than any other previously employed approach.

The following overview of the "Effectiveness Study Report" describes the work undertaken during the past year. The first direct immediate result of the process analysis work was task standardization and improvement in the Library's meeting room and program booking work.

## THREE-PRONGED APPROACH TO EFFECTIVENESS

The work was accomplished via a three-pronged approach:

- **Strategic Planning.** A review of the previous year's Space and Expansion Study was conducted to extract patron desires for services, obtained during focus groups held with a cross section of the community.
- **Library Effectiveness Study.** The Library undertook a study to determine what staff and volunteers currently do and how much time all tasks take<sup>2</sup>. Staff members identified all current tasks, and a survey of staff and volunteers during regular work hours showed how much time was dedicated to each of those tasks.
- **Task Standardization and Improvement.** Two library teams learned new methods to improve tasks<sup>3</sup>. This is being accomplished through ongoing task standardization, a newly-learned approach that has become part of the regular culture of improvement at the Library.

The Library formed two inter-locking teams:

- The Strategic Planning Committee of the Board of Trustees provided the broad vision of what the Library would do through the development of Strategic Initiatives and oversaw the work of the
- Effectiveness Study Planning Team, composed of the Director, the Head Librarian, a full-time and one part-time staff person, two volunteers, and two members of the Board of Trustees. The Director and the Head Librarian developed the Goals for those Strategic Initiatives. The Planning Team developed the Objectives and Activities.

The two teams worked back and forth reviewing each other's work, suggesting changes and improvements, and in the end, developed a practical Strategic Plan that is expected to serve the Library during the next three to four years.

## STRATEGIC PLANNING

The first part of the three-pronged project was the development of a new Strategic Plan. During 2005–

2006, the Library engaged the services of Providence Associates of Cottonwood, Arizona, a professional consulting firm offering planning services to libraries nationwide. The consultants held focus group interviews with adult, youth, and Hispanic customers and non-customers in the Sedona community to determine what services they would like to see the Library provide. The outcomes of these focus groups provided the information needed to begin our strategic planning work. They provided demographics on the communities Sedona Public Library serves, an in-depth set of recommendations for how the Library can best make use of existing space, and anticipated changes to the physical plant for the next 20 years.

Based on customer and non-customer input, demographic projections, and their own knowledge of the Library and community, the Library's Strategic Planning Committee determined broad Strategic Initiatives, clarified and updated the Mission Statement, defined new Goals and Objectives, and adopted specific activities with definable responsibilities and timelines.

It is expected that the Strategic Plan will be updated on a yearly basis. As we accomplish Activities, new Activities will be defined to ensure that progress continues toward the Goals and Objectives. This process of annual review and updating is in keeping with the Library's *culture of improvement*.

## LIBRARY EFFECTIVENESS STUDY

The second part of the project was to clarify the tasks currently done and how much time is spent doing them. The contract with the City of Sedona stated that the Library would engage in a staffing study during 2006–2007, and implement the results of that study during 2007–2008. In the early part of the first year of the contract, Director David Keeber and Head Librarian Norma Fowler determined the best way to conduct such a study, what was meant by the term, and what would be most beneficial for the Library if such a large project were undertaken. Meetings with Eric Levitt, City Manager, and Ramon Gomez, City Council Liaison to the Library, ensured that the City and the Library were in agreement with the project's intended outcomes and the intent of the City/Library contract.

The Library chose a "self-survey" approach based on the *Staffing for Results* method, with the staff and volunteers recording what they did, rather than observers recording the data (Mayo 2002). Through a competitive bid process, the Library engaged the services of Sara Laughlin & Associates, Inc., professional library consultants with expertise in surveys and task improvement.

After each staff member submitted a list of their tasks, Laughlin spent a day and a half at the Library

working with the staff to design the survey process and interviewing staff to ensure clarity on the development of the task lists. The language used to describe the tasks was standardized, resulting in a comprehensive list of 230 different tasks being done throughout the year to provide library services to Library customers.

The list of 230 tasks was further refined to 75 broader task groups to make the actual survey work "do-able." Survey instruments were developed in both paper and electronic form, and tested during a "dry run" to ensure understandability and effective output. After minor revision, staff members recorded data on their own activities for two weeks on alternate days, thereby ensuring all shifts and days were examined (Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday of one week and Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday of the next). Completed survey forms were sent to the consultants for data compilation and a report on the outcomes.

In general, the report on the survey resulted in a number of interesting findings, including:

- Staff and volunteers spend approximately 80 percent of their time on about one-third of the tasks defined. These tasks include basic customer services such as circulation and reference, facility and collection maintenance, and time spent in meetings, communication, and planning.
- Staff provides approximately 55 percent and the volunteers provide approximately 45 percent of total time worked during a typical week.

Figure 1 is a Pareto Chart showing total time spent on each of the top 39 tasks during the survey week, by staff and volunteers.

The Effectiveness Study Planning Team concluded that, to become more efficient, reduce errors, and find additional time to provide the new services outlined in the Strategic Plan, the bulk of any such improvement efforts must be focused on this top third of tasks. Staff and volunteers needed to be able to fully understand what they do as they engage in those tasks and then find ways to improve how they do them. Lastly, a *culture of improvement* needed to be developed to make sure that these efforts would be sustained. Ongoing efforts and continually applied new skills and methods needed to be employed to ensure effective work and the best use of the public's money.

## TASK STANDARDIZATION AND IMPROVEMENT

The third part of the project was to improve the ways in which staff and volunteers worked, with the anticipated outcomes being increased accuracy, raised customer satisfaction, reduced time spent on correcting mistakes, and time to implement the new Goals and Objectives in the Strategic Plan.

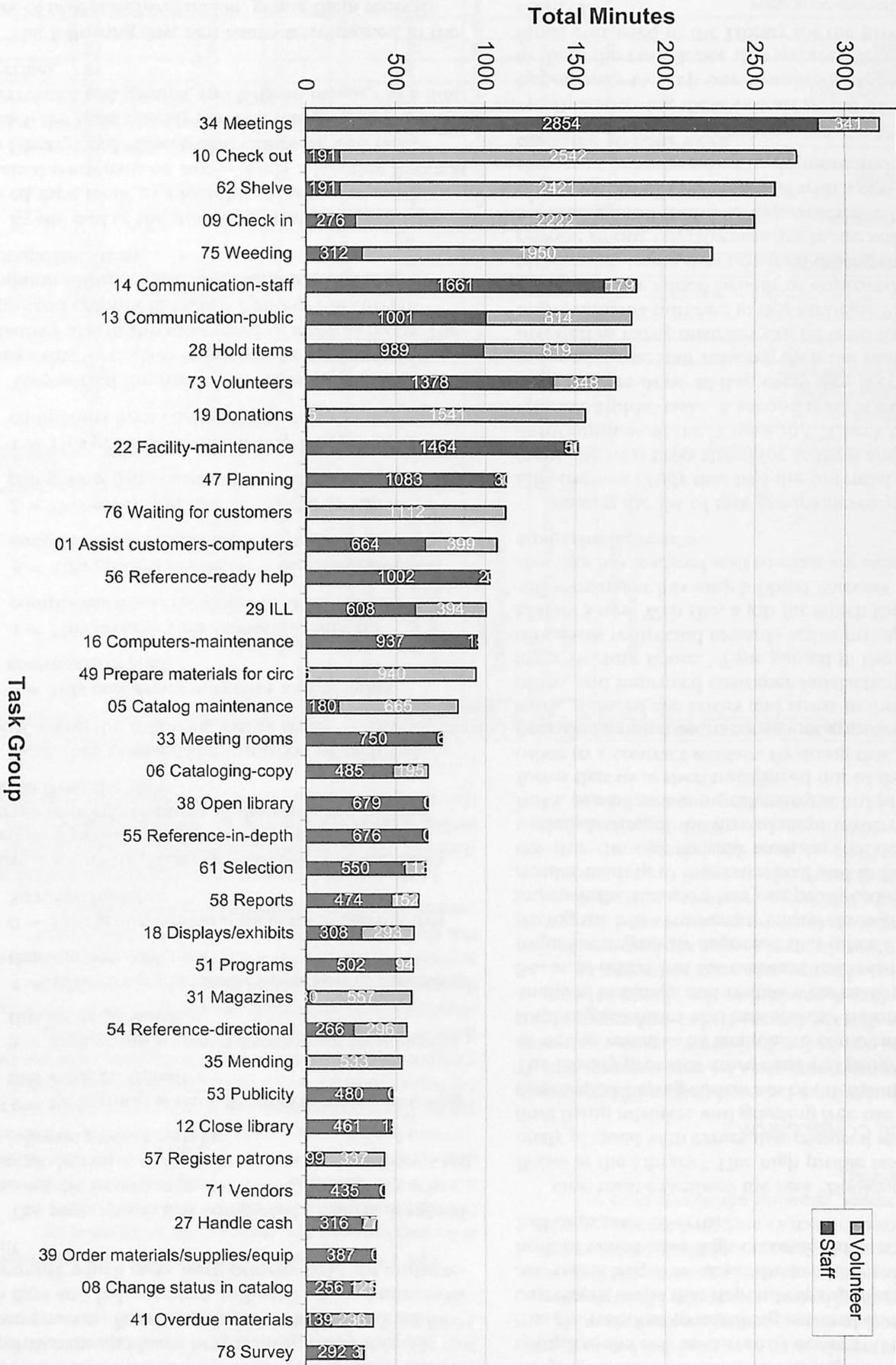


Figure 1: Sedona Public Library: Staff and Volunteer Minutes/Week in Top 39 Task Groups

To do this, staff needed to identify tasks in need of improvement and learn new skills to make those improvements. Sara Laughlin returned to Sedona for two days and led exercises with staff and volunteers to determine which tasks were priority tasks for improvement.

The participants first completed a matrix designed to assess the importance of each task group to each Strategic Initiative in the Library's new plan. They used the following rating system:

5 = Task group is critically important to achieving this Strategic Initiative

3 = Task group somewhat important to achieving this Strategic Initiative

1 = Task group marginally important to achieving this Strategic Initiative

0 = Task group has no impact on achieving this Strategic Initiative

Figure 2 shows the Strategic Initiatives and the tasks, listed in order of importance. The participants' average importance rating is shown in the column second from the right.

Next, they assessed the condition of each task group, using the following rating scale:

5 = This task group surprises and delights customers or staff.

4 = This process runs smoothly, with no complaints from customers or staff.

3 = This process results in occasional errors or complaints from customers or staff.

2 = This process results in regular errors or complaints from customers or staff.

1 = This process results in very frequent errors or complaints from customers or staff.

They sorted the results, in order to find those task groups that were most important to the Strategic Initiatives and in the most need of improvement. The right-hand column in Figure 2 shows the current condition ratings of the tasks most important to the Strategic Initiatives.

By the end of the day, the participants had narrowed their focus to a handful of tasks, and easily reached consensus on two—"Book a Meeting Room at the Library" and "Check Out, Check In, and Holds" (which the team quickly realized was probably three interrelated task groups, too large to manage as a first exercise).

The following day, two teams were trained in the work of *task standardization*, giving them tools to

"unpack" a task, understand the steps needed to complete the task as currently done, and identify steps that are essential to satisfying external and internal customers, steps that depend on suppliers, etc. The two teams began work on the two chosen task groups, both of which have high customer impact and currently had high rates of error.

One team examined the task "Booking a Meeting Room at the Library." This high profile task was previously plagued with errors that required staff to waste time fixing mistakes and granting free use to appease disgruntled paying customers of the meeting rooms. The Library provides more than 400 programs per year, as well as rental of its facilities to community members, local organizations and businesses.<sup>4</sup> Before the task analysis, bookings and rentals were managed out of the business office, but the constant interruptions of inquiries negatively impacted that office's main work of paying the bills. Numerous efforts through the years to improve the situation had not produced the desired results, leading to frustrated staff and unhappy customers. But, through the task analysis, staff developed a full understanding of the myriad steps involved in these tasks, as well as a comprehensive set of procedures and forms that were then transferred out of the business office to a contract worker. By doing this, we have provided a much more consistent approach to the work, reduced the errors and stress in the business office, and improved customer satisfaction with "Booking a Meeting Room." Time gained in the business office was redirected towards active management of the Library's new Web site, a job for which the business office manager has long lobbied. Success in improving this task has inspired staff to examine other tasks to attain similar results.

Among the list of task groups developed during the Effectiveness Study that had the potential for improvement, the next tasks slated for analysis and task standardization were the "Check In," "Check Out," and "Handle Holds" tasks. A second team is examining these tasks that are done all day, every day. If errors can be reduced there, staff reasons, then the time previously invested in fixing mistakes can be used for other improvements outlined in our Strategic Plan, to say nothing of the added benefit of improved customer satisfaction. Using data obtained during the survey portion of our Effectiveness Study, we will set targets for time gained from our improvements. These tangible outcomes should provide staff with a real sense that they are not being asked to do more and more within the same 40 hour week.

By improving these two areas, the Library has the opportunity to keep our customers happier and instill in them the confidence that we are effectively using the funds entrusted to the Library for the provision of services.

The Library's larger goal is to build the capacity of the initial team members so they can lead future teams in addressing other areas needing improvement. By growing a *culture of improvement*, the Library's effectiveness will improve over the long term. We believe these improvement techniques will help reduce staff time spent correcting errors and "making things right" with our customers, allowing additional time to implement the Plan.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Library management believed that an Effectiveness Study would comply with the City requirements and ensure the best results for the Library and its customers. Understanding that the City wished to make certain that the public funding it provides to the Library is being used in the most effective manner, the project as outlined above was deemed to give the best results. By determining what services the public wanted from their Library (Strategic Planning), examining what staff are doing currently (Library Effectiveness Study), and finding ways to both improve what the Library currently does and to provide the new services requested (Task Standardization and Improvement), managers are

confident that the Library has fulfilled both its contractual obligation and its responsibility to the public for ensuring the most effective provision of service possible.

The challenge of any Strategic Plan, once written, is its implementation. Success can sometimes be translated into increases in the library's budget, but initially that Plan must show progress with the funds and staff already in hand. Finding the staff time is often extremely challenging and seldom does the Director get staff buy-in simply by exhorting them to do more on top of existing work loads. By investing effort in process analysis and task standardization, time can be gained within existing staff hours. The resulting improvements gleaned from this work have provided the necessary time to implement more and more portions of the Library's Strategic Plan, while improving staff morale and customer satisfaction. Those results, by any measure can be seen as success.

In the original project plan, the Library hoped to discover a large set of tasks to drop outright thereby saving time in the short term. What staff learned was that there were only one or two things that they could

**Figure 2: Task Groups Sorted by Importance and Showing Current Condition**

Task Group Number	Task Group	Strategic Initiatives							Importance of Task Group to All Strategic Initiatives	Current Condition of Task Group
		1. Center for community activities	2. Up-to-date technology resources and delivery systems	3. Reach out to the Spanish-speaking community	4. Learning support services and programs for youth	5. Literacy and information resource center	6. Positive working environment for staff and volunteers	7. Efficiency, effectiveness, and fiscal prudence		
47	Planning	5	5	5	5	5	3	5	33	4
30	Library instruction	5	5	5	5	5	5	0	30	5
13	Communication-public	3	3	3	5	5	5	5	29	4
16	Computers-maintenance	3	5	3	5	5	5	0	26	2
74	Web site	5	5	5	5	5	1	0	26	2
73	Volunteers	5	5	1	5	5	5	0	26	4
70	Tours	5	5	5	5	5	0	0	25	5
51	Programs	5	5	5	5	3	0	0	23	5
15	Computers-installation	1	5	1	5	5	5	0	22	3
34	Meetings	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	21	4
59	Resolve problems	0	5	5	5	1	5	0	21	4
61	Selection	0	5	5	5	5	1	0	21	5
33	Meeting rooms	5	5	3	3	3	0	0	19	3
53	Publicity	5	3	3	3	3	1	1	19	3
2	Assist customers-find materials	3	3	3	5	5	0	0	19	5
39	Order materials/supplies/equipment	1	0	5	5	5	3	0	19	5
14	Communication-staff	3	3	1	3	3	5	0	18	3
68	Staff-training	0	3	3	3	3	5	1	18	3
42	Partnerships	5	1	3	3	1	0	5	18	5
75	Weeding	1	0	3	5	5	3	0	17	3
1	Assist customers-computers	3	5	3	3	3	0	0	17	4

immediately drop. The consultant recommended to stop removing the names of deceased patrons from the database (if they stopped using their library cards, the normal purging of inactive customers from our database every three years would accomplish this task) and to cease rewinding returned VHS tapes. The time saved from these tasks is estimated at only an hour per month, combined.

Staff discovered instead which task groups were most and least important to accomplishing the Strategic Plan and could compare this list with the time currently allocated to each task group. Further, they realized that there were many places that could benefit from small “tweaks” to improve the tasks, or shifting how they did the work, thereby making it more efficient and effective.

Through *task standardization*, the new set of skills learned during this project, Library managers and staff are determined to concentrate on the few, most important task groups needing improvement, and, through improvement, find the time required to implement the Strategic Plan. Staff is now aware of ways to engage in the work of solving many of the problems that have plagued them and customers. What once was seen as “just the way it is” as they struggled to deal with errors, a constantly rushed pace, and high levels of stress as a result, are now seen as solvable challenges. Staff is eager and ready to go beyond the initial two teams engaged in task standardization and begin to focus on other task groups that have proven to be stumbling blocks through the years. In this way, not only will the Library have fulfilled its obligation to the City of Sedona and its citizens to be as effective as possible, it will be capable of solving challenges on its own.

The larger challenge of this project is that it needs to be ongoing. While some may have hoped to find ways to maintain or reduce current staff levels, it must be recognized that the current work of providing library services is not being *reduced*, but will be *improved*. Further, the new Strategic Plan, driven by customer requests for additional services, will require time, attention, and staff. Lastly, ongoing efforts to achieve higher levels of effectiveness through task standardization and improvement will also require staff time. The results of this project, therefore, indicate that the Library will gain *effectiveness* versus a reduction or containment of staffing levels.

Library use statistics show healthy and sustained levels of growth. The range of services is also broadening. Some examples: larger numbers of Latino community members who are seeking ways to integrate into this culture and recognize that the Library is an excellent tool to assist in accomplishing that goal and expected higher levels of use by well-educated “baby boomers,” who seek a healthy, active lifestyle.

The Effectiveness Study has presented a number of valuable findings. First, the Library staff has learned what Library services our customers want and need. Second, they have learned how the Library currently serves those customers. Third, they have learned how to improve what they do when they serve customers. And fourth, they have learned that the solutions to problems that seemed unsolvable previously are within their grasp. The Sedona Public Library is effective and has found ways to grow in its effectiveness through the creation of a *culture of improvement* that ensures the best use of the public funds entrusted to it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Keeber, MLS, has been the Director of the Sedona Public Library, which serves the residents of Sedona and the Village of Oak Creek, Arizona, since 1993.

## REFERENCES

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