The Quality Library: A Guide to Staff-Driven Improvement, Better Efficiency, and Happier Customers

Sara Laughlin and Ray W. Wilson. *The Quality Library: A Guide to Staff-Driven Improvement, Better Efficiency, and Happier Customers*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2008. 192 pp. $55.00. Paper. ISBN: 9780838909522.

Sara Laughlin and Ray Wilson are organizational consultants who have followed up on their first joint effort, *The Library's Continuous Improvement Fieldbook: 29 Ready-to-Use Tools*, with this newest title aimed at breaking down and organizing a wide range of library tasks. Ms. Laughlin teaches as an adjunct faculty member in the Indiana University School of Library and Information Science; she has a consultant practice focusing on libraries. Mr. Wilson's postgraduate education centered on engineering, and he shares his organizational management expertise not just with libraries but with other organizations ranging from hospitals to the military. This second work about library management targets academic and public library administrators and employees who strive to improve their libraries by improving their processes (xi). Their prescription for organizational improvement entails breaking down all library activity—notwithstanding whether in public or technical services—into the smallest and most basic tasks. A task constitutes a single action. Next, Laughlin and Wilson delve into the meat of their thesis that all tasks can be organized into processes, which are a series of interrelated tasks which result in an end product or output. Going to the next level, they define a system as a series of interrelated processes. Therefore, all library activity is reduced to single tasks that are organized into processes and eventually systems which result in the fulfillment of the activity in as efficient and timely a manner as possible. Their management theory is grounded in the work of the American statistician and business consultant W. Edwards Deming who introduced the concept of quality control in postwar Japan.

Laughlin and Wilson employ flow charts liberally to illustrate their points throughout the text. The contents of the book are neatly diagrammed as a flow chart in the introduction to emphasize their thesis of process improvement. The first chapter asks the reader to picture a library as a system with defined mission, vision, values, and means to measure processes. The second chapter calls attention to library processes and discusses how to prioritize them. Once these processes have been identified and prioritized, chapter three describes how to standardize and test the overall process. Chapter four is devoted to how to collect data and measure the effectiveness of the process. Chapters five and six proceed to the next logical level by discussing process improvement based on the collected data and then making the improvements system wide. Despite the tight organization of the content, Laughlin and Wilson wisely include anecdotes about real-life experiences concerning mastering processes in libraries. These first-hand accounts from libraries give the reader a clearer sense of what is possible within one's workplace. Two appendices further enhance the utility of the book by means of compiling comprehensive lists of processes in Appendix A and a list of the ways in which to measure the usefulness of the processes in Appendix B. A short but very helpful glossary of improvement terms is included. A short list of references for more study is included before the index.

In view of the fact that many theological libraries are staffed by five or fewer persons, this reviewer posed a question to the authors as to how feasible process management is for very subject-specified and minimally staffed libraries. In the reply received, the author indicated a strong belief that process mastering was attainable in theological school

environments. The author allowed that mastering the processes of the library would take more time with smaller staff. One staff person could pass along his version of a reorganized process to the next for review and revision. Once the plan had been handled by each staff member, then the process could proceed to implementation. The author believed that interested and engaged work-study students could make a significant contribution in the process-mastering activity. A further observation from the author was that student workers tend to notice vital factors that regular library staff do not. Since student assistants turn over so frequently, it makes it even more imperative to standardize and record the processes (Ray Wilson, e-mail message to reviewer, February 9, 2009).

This reviewer sees merit in management by improvement of processes. Having served an eight-year tenure as a public library administrator, such strong scrutiny of activity with an eye towards constant reorganization and improvement of tasks is vital in meeting high-volume service demands. The authors point to four staff being the optimum number to form a team and commence the mastering of processes. Identifying that number of persons attracted to new ideas and approaches in libraries with twenty or more staff is realistic. However, engagement with such attempts as the reorganization of tasks becomes much less feasible with minimal full-time staff. Moreover, the implementation of a system organizing human tasks in institutions preparing caring and helping professionals gives one pause. Looking over the flow charts, graphs, and equations for data analysis can leave the reader sensing a cold, mechanistic environment. Laughlin and Wilson's anecdotes from libraries placed a much-needed human face on a very analytic and abstract discussion. Both the academic and public libraries featured in the anecdotes are good-size institutions that could definitely benefit from process management. Since no small theological school libraries participated in Laughlin and Wilson's studies, the reader is left to question whether process management is viable in theological schools and seminaries, though the author's response does allay this fear somewhat.

In small organizations, the presence and actions of one person can have important influence on the activity and productivity of all others where there is interconnectedness. For example, if the circulation manager is ill or unavailable, then the productivity of the cataloger/serials manager/acquisitions/reference librarian who must fill the void will be affected, in terms of the number of materials ordered in the course of the day, items cataloged, or how far the planning for instructional session will progress. When looking at the implementation of task reorganization as described in *The Quality Library* where full-time staff are five or fewer and student employees are faced with unforeseen schedule changes due to internships, part-time work, or class scheduling, then the execution of such a program becomes much more difficult. This reviewer does not completely dismiss the possibilities for task processing and systematization in theological libraries, but small numbers of staff with very specific duties make such systemization efforts problematic at best. Still, *The Quality Library* is recommended to all library administrators and managers seeking ways to improve internal operations and services.

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