Soft systems analysis and the management of libraries, information services and resource centres

Underwood, Peter G.

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We live in a period of accelerating change. Great political events change our perception of the world. Fundamental changes in society restructure our lives. New technology means that the impossible becomes commonplace. Change is all around us and the capacity to manage change effectively is viewed as the crucial attribute of a successful manager in today's organizations.

What demands will these changes make on the competencies required of the managers and staff of libraries, information services and resource centres in the years ahead?

History shows that managerial competencies vary along with the nature of environmental change. Different eras demand different skills and abilities. Up until the 1960s, successful management often rested on the mastery of specific techniques. The ability to combine technical, human and conceptual skills to create efficiency often provided the basis for success. During the 1970s and 1980s this has begun to change. While these skills and abilities are still relevant, increased environmental turbulence has created an atmosphere of change and uncertainty that calls for new abilities. Now more than ever, organizations and their members face the dual problem of how to do the right thing *and* how to do it well. In the process, the whole concept of competence is changing. Increasingly, it rests in the development of attitudes, values, and 'mindsets' that allow managers to confront, understand, and deal with a wide range of forces within and outside their organizations, as well as in the development of operational skills.

In this regard, this book on soft systems analysis is a timely and welcome addition to the existing range of 'hard' systems techniques. Soft systems analysis – a type of analysis which highlights the human dimension – is one of the methods which can be used to analyse the needs of individuals and groups of people who are working in, or affected by what goes on in a changing organization. This type of analysis is viewed as of value to those responsible for the management of an organization, since it can offer insights into the behaviour of the people concerned and can also assist in developing and implementing solutions to problems. Although this method did not originate within the context of libraries, information services and resource centres, and few published examples of its use within this context are available, it offers some advantages when used within this particular frame of reference. For example, the objectives of libraries, information services and resource centres are difficult to encapsulate in a few brief phrases: they serve users with often widely divergent sets of needs and with no clear way of estimating their success in meeting those needs.

The question of *what* to do is, then, often unclear and may evoke different responses from those responsible for deciding. Because the soft systems approach to problems recognizes and encourages the study of such differences of opinions and perceptions it offers a good starting point for developing strategies for the management of change in libraries, information services and resource centres.

Furthermore, for managers of libraries, information services and resource centres a large proportion of their work is concerned with people, whether staff, users or other stakeholders. The political and social components of this work are aspects which are especially suited to the use of soft systems analysis. Problems associated with people are rarely simple because of the range of responses to events, differing perceptions and the psychological complexities of understanding motivation and behaviour. In this regard soft systems analysis can be a valuable tool, if used correctly, for gaining a greater understanding of what is going on and why.

In the first chapter the author goes about setting the context, explaining some of the terms the reader will encounter and something of the history of the development of soft systems analysis. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on what the managerial function of planning, and working with a group, respectively involves. This is because soft systems analysis is most often used when planning or seeking to respond positively to some change and because the discussion of such planning or response almost always involves other people.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of soft systems analysis, with the intention of identifying its components, its activities, and the sequence of their use. It is intended to be used with the next two chapters, which discuss the two principal tools of soft systems analysis: interviews and models. The fact that these two tools are used interdependently adds to the utility of soft systems analysis. Taken together, Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are the core of the book and, if the reader are confident about his or her understanding of planning and how to work with groups, reading of the preliminary chapters may be unnecessary.

The final chapter provides a bridge between the 'systems world' explored in the core chapters and the 'real world' which we inhabit as managers, consultants, workers and people going about our lives. Its purpose is to explain how to

translate the ideas gained from a period of soft systems analysis into a set of requirements which those responsible can put into action.

This book is well written and contains illustrative examples from the author's own experience as a consultant using soft systems analysis. It will be of interest to anyone who wishes to gain a better understanding of how to become more pro-active and skilled in dealing with the managerial turbulence that lies ahead.

The following errata were identified: on page v of the *Contents page* under the chapter heading, The management of planning, the entry 'Systems analysis and social planning' will be found on page 41, and not on page 36. Similarly, on page vii under the heading, *Further reading*, the entry for 'Soft systems analysis' should refer the reader to page 185 and not page 184, and the entry 'Journals' is wrongly linked to page 185; the matter is actually discussed on page 186. Finally, on page 76, line 7, the word 'be' should be inserted after 'will'.

H.E. AURET
Library and Information Studies, Technikon SA, Florida.