

**Leadership & Management Division
Business Meeting, SLA Annual Conference, Washington, DC
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NO EXCUSES. Address by Stephen Abram [SirsiDynix, Toronto, Ontario, Canada] at the Business Meeting of the Leadership and Management Division, Monday, 15 June 2009, SLA Annual Conference, Washington, DC

Transcribed by Judith Siess, Information Bridges International, Champaign, IL, 23 June 2009

From the program description:

“Stephen Abram, the globe-trotting past-president of SLA, will share stories about innovative leaders from around the world, focusing on their strategies and successes and illustrating how we can learn from the practices of others. Abram’s goal is to inspire us to become innovative leaders.”

He said that he was very nervous because he was “going naked”—without PowerPoint slides.

Librarians have a big story to tell. We add value.

You matter, by Seth Godin, from his blog

(http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2009/06/you-matter.html)

- When you love the work you do and the people you do it with, you matter.
- When you are so gracious and generous and aware that you think of other people before yourself, you matter.
- When you leave the world a better place than you found it, you matter.
- When you continue to raise the bar on what you do and how you do it, you matter.
- When you teach and forgive and teach more before you rush to judge and demean, you matter.
- When you touch the people in your life through your actions (and your words), you matter.
- When kids grow up wanting to be you, you matter.
- When you see the world as it is, but insist on making it more like it could be, you matter.
- When you inspire a Nobel Prize winner or a slum dweller, you matter.
- When the room brightens when you walk in, you matter.
- And when the legacy you leave behind lasts for hours, days or a lifetime, you matter.

The SLA Alignment Project

Information is a weak word. Storage and delivery don’t resonate.

Information combined with insight is intelligence, or knowledge.

What is a “special” library anyway?

Information Professionals are about intelligence, insight and added value.

Surprise, successful futures require some difficult changes for us today.

“If not you, who? If not now, when?” [Taken from the Hebrew sage, Hillel: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when?”]

Change and Innovation

Now, what have I learned about change and innovation?

I'll tell some stories today and offer some of my learnings.

I know a lot of innovative and talented people. I'll tell you about my daughter, who challenges me every day and is one of my role models.

Sydney is driven—in her very soul—to create and be different.

She's 20. I started to realize just how different she is when she was 14. She learns okay, but she learns differently than everyone else in our family

She was involved with a band—first called *Fresh Produce* and now is *Kelly and the Kelly Girls*.

She's on *Facebook* and *MySpace*. She's a great gymnast. She's studying for a BFA in fashion photography at York University (Toronto). She has her own jewelry line, Rebel Palace. She's a choreographer. She performs and writes music (for guitar, viola, and piano). She's been a camp counselor. She coaches and teaches gymnastics at University of Toronto. She's done dozens of fashion shows, magazine covers, and fashion layouts. What makes her so innovative? Where does the creativity come from? Who are these creative people and what can we learn from them?

My opinion: she wants to. She plays. She practices. She throws things out a lot. She does not have a frictionless personality; she irritates some people (including her parents). She takes risks. She has a huge network; she learns from everyone. There are no cliques. There are no excuses; she never feels anything is impossible. She is committed in her soul to innovation and creativity. She is fearless as far as I can tell.

I am fearful. I try to remember that if Sydney can do what she does, then I can too. In my ongoing battle with self esteem and fear issues, I take risks and always get a reward. I've learned that if I don't take those risks, I lose. I have many public embarrassments as I learn from failure. Just check out my YouTube video singing Eminem if you don't believe that I've learned to handle embarrassment.

From the book, *Ignore Everybody: and 39 Other Keys to Creativity*, by Hugh MacLeod (Portfolio, 2009, ISBN 978-159184259-0, US\$23.95).

The title says it all . . . Innovation is by definition the creation of something that doesn't exist. There is **no** best practice yet. You can't reduce the risk by doing things the way others have trod the path. You have to decide if what you believe in is good enough to fight for, to pursue, and to risk everything for. Only you can decide this.

“Good ideas come with a heavy burden; which is why so few people execute them. Few people can handle it.”

“Stop worrying about the technology. Start worrying about the people who trust you.”

“No one person can be good at everything. The really good artists, the really successful entrepreneurs figure out how to circumvent their limitations.”

Commitment

Can you describe your commitment, your passion?

If you have passion, then you have the energy, my wife, Stephanie, says.

So, what have I observed and learned about commitment? (from Ignore Everyone)

You must be willing to:

1. View innovation as a continuous process, not a one-time act (iteration).
2. Provide adequate resources to innovation initiative, but not too much.
 - a. Time to think, create, play, collaborate, and innovate.
 - b. Money to experiment and build.
 - c. People to devote thought, time and money to new ideas.
3. Tolerate ambiguity, risk and learned failures. Celebrate progress and failure.
4. Provide cover for ideas and the people who create them.
5. Commit to innovation even during tough financial times.
6. Create a culture of creativity, new ideas and collaboration.
7. Learn continuously and deep (10,000 hours).
8. Define and share corporate problems/challenges/opportunities.
9. Define and share a growth strategy and vision of the future.
10. Reward and recognize people for being creative and innovative.
11. Quit (Seth Godin's "The Dip").
12. Evaluate projects/portfolios for innovation strategy.
13. Challenge the status quo.
14. Champion new ideas.
15. Set meaningful goals.
16. Search the horizon.
17. Solve problems.
18. Exceed customer expectations but getting out in front of them.

No excuses: find the reason.

You can overcome obstacles that are reasons as opposed to excuses.

Where do the dilemmas come from?

Here are the innovation dilemmas (tensions) that I observe in organizations.

- Whether to invest in innovations vs. development.
- Whether to pursue disruptive ideas vs. incremental ideas.
- Whether to use problem-to-solution vs. solution-to-problem approaches.
- Whether to use divergence vs. convergence.
- Whether to build innovation teams with diversity vs. content expertise.

Here's a small list of innovation niche areas that I found...perhaps you can think of more:

- New product development
- Research and development
- Prototyping
- Idea generation
- Organizational creativity
- Design
- Marketing/advertising

- Open innovation/co-creation
- Innovation management and leadership
- Innovation processes and tools (mind mapping, idea management software, etc.)
- Strategy and planning
- Metrics, measurement and analysis
- Intellectual property (patents, legal protections)
- Culture, people, HR
- Customer/consumer research and ethnography
- Trends, future farming and horizon studies
- Portfolio and project management
- Scientific and engineering
- Collaboration and meetings
- Training and skill development

No excuses—only reasons

If you have two lists of innovation limiters and encouragers, which list is longer?

Think...what's the difference between an excuse and a reason?

Here are our TOP TEN reasons why [we can't do things].

10. Innovation sparks dissonance and discomfort.
9. Innovation increases the amount of seeming failures.
8. Results only show up long term.
7. More meetings.
6. CEOs conserve resources. Innovation requires more resources.
5. Innovation flies in the face of analysis.
4. The perceived absence of time.
3. Over-reliance on cost-cutting and incremental improvement.
2. Inability to enroll a committed team of champions.
1. Insufficient conviction that innovation will make a difference.

We are on the leading edge. We are the first global and international information profession. We are here at the beginning of what is clearly the foundation of a new information and knowledge-based economy. That's exciting! We are also challenged by birthing pains—massive disruptions in the global economy, the employment situation, restructuring and political changes. It's truly an interesting time. In my email inbox I get reminders from members who think I don't notice that the economy is souring. Thanks, I didn't miss it though. I just don't see the benefit of dwelling on it as a problem. I prefer to find solutions and I'm proud of the actions the SLA Board has taken. I won't list them here, but there are dozens to note for those who've been paying attention.

We are seeing the emergence of an amazing revitalized profession at one of the key points in world history. We get to bring fresh perspectives to one of the most challenging times in our history! We actually get to create, to invent, to innovate. We are tasked with a great responsibility for education, learning, research, invention, technology, commerce, and trade. Of course, this can only happen if we believe. I don't want to get all *X-Files* on you, but I do worry that some folks, our fellow members, are letting the daunting challenge facing us and deciding that the challenge is insurmountable and they're giving up, already! AND OMG [O my God], they have excuses. Whine, whine, whine.

You're ready to help create the future, right? What are you going to do? You have some great role models already. Libraries matter. Libraries change lives. We always have. The world is a better place for your existence and the work you do every day. Don't forget that.

Decades from now, what will you look back on as your great accomplishments? If people had given up their dreams in the Great Depression of the Thirties, what would the world have become? Decide now to continue to have incremental experience building each year on the last. Your calling means that you build something fantastic with every information task, every user interaction, and every question answered.

Over the decades I've observed and met so many of our librarian colleagues who chose to make a difference on so many levels. They committed to our profession. Yes! They committed to changing the world for the better! Professionals commit. In my year as SLA president and in my job and career I have had the amazing privilege to meet many wonderful colleagues around the world and the great work being done was transformational. I don't tell you some of their stories here to embarrass them, because most are quite modest about their accomplishments. I choose a few to remind you that there is a need for our contributions, that of human information professionals, when technology is at the forefront. If we fail to add value then much will be lost and I believe that we risk a new Dark Age if we stand back.

For example, our SLA colleague, James, spent years in the military as a librarian researching everything there is to know about IEDs [improvised explosive devices] and land mines in Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond. This librarian knows that his research saved and is saving countless lives every day—soldiers and children. It's not just online searching in a blinking box.

My friend (and SLA member), Mary Lee, built one of the first intranets in the world in the 1990s that saved her company US\$120 million annually and raised revenues by US\$70 million per year, before building a huge KM [knowledge management] initiative as CKO [Chief Knowledge Officer] at Microsoft. She makes global businesses stronger by making them smarter with information strategies. Powerful intranets don't just happen when you plug in the machines.

And then there's Joan. Her CEO recognized her with a surprise cheque for six figures. And that was just for proactively answering a single question at her company—one that saved millions of dollars in patent R&D. He wanted to make the point to all employees that he truly valued libraries and that good information matters to corporate decision-making success. Every question has the potential for massive impact, even if we don't always see it. Corporations, people's careers and lives improve because we search, collect, and serve.

My best friend, and former SLA president, Jane [Dysart, 1995-1996], has devoted the last 20 years to designing the most transformational conferences in our field internationally and attracting everyone in the field, well beyond libraries, to build a vision of the virtual future. Sometimes more than 150,000 people show up to a single event she organizes! She has filled the New York Javits Center, the San Francisco Moscone Center, Los Angeles's Staples Center, Olympia in London, and more with the widest range of information professionals working on inventing the future. Her events have personally influenced the founders of Yahoo! and Google when they were still students at Stanford, and attracted attention from Bill Gates, Tata [of India], Larry Ellison [of Oracle] and more! Librarians are there at the important conversations about the confluence of technology, content, and people.

Our own CEO, Janice [Lachance], has laboured diligently as the appointed library representative to the Tripoli round of international copyright treaty planning as well as, recently, achieving SLA being granted observer status to WIPO [World Intellectual Property Organization]. SLA is better positioned than ever to influence the future transit of the underpinning laws of the information society. As laws about content like copyright, DRM [digital rights management], and patents become the core of the technology-driven information society. SLA will be there to influence the outcome. How awesome is that?

My friend and SLA member, Sandy, reduced the overall death rate in her hospital by building an information service based on PDA phones from her hospital library. Like I said, Librarians Save Lives. Add to this my good SLA friend and volunteer Joanne [Gard Marshall], who built a research methodology to prove our important role in healthcare success. She made good data proofs that librarians in hospital save lives, lots of lives! And achieve positive health consequences too. Last week a hospital administrator shut down the library. That's just a special kind of stupid.

I admire SLA members Nellie and Sharon who serve the soldiers of all nations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and worldwide to provide reading and entertainment to soldiers' laptops and phones. Besides making life more bearable, they're having a positive impact on PTSD (post-traumatic stress disease), suicide and accident rate, too.

My LIS education heroes, Ken, Keith, Ross, and David, who engage in and promote the research that proves that school libraries matter, have provided data and proofs that good school libraries measurably and sustainably improve student performance, and have saved thousands of school libraries and had a major positive impact on generations of our children. It's not an inconsequential amount—it exceeds 15-25 percent increases in standardized test scores! If our children are our future, then libraries do matter.

In my early career, I met Barbara and Rick, who built the very first large-scale successful full-text searchable [Canadian] newspaper database, which ultimately became hundreds of news databases stretching back to the 1700s! As a mere student beta tester, I was inspired by their vision to save our access to our history and culture. I know I care about my Canadian culture as much as you care about yours. They started small and they dreamed big. Eventually I got to work with the teams that converted over 500 newspapers back to the 1700s! It was impossible so it took a little longer.

Today I remind you of the hundreds of librarians who protect our democracies. The two Marys (both SLA past chapter presidents) who went to South Africa 12 years ago to help rebuild South Africa's parliamentary library at the invitation of then-president Nelson Mandela. And Gwenneth, who did the same thing in Ukraine. And past SLA president, Donna, who returned, with no fanfare or press release, a complete set of Iraqi laws and court judgments to Afghanistan from the collection of the US Law Library of Congress after every single local and national copy was destroyed under the Taliban. We must remember that democracies can persist because of libraries. Even the old technologies in our archives have value!

I enjoy hearing stories about my fellow SLA member, Marty, who is an expert in money laundering research, who regularly protects our world monetary system as well as foiling drug cartels and the drug trade. As technology changes, this becomes an even bigger problem. We play a role in finding solutions.

Mike, Warren, Carol and Mark, and now countless others, are digitizing millions of books and information for *Google*, the Open Content Alliance, *Canadiana.org*, and more for posterity. The world will be a very different for future generations because they took a risk. As of 2008, the Web is now more than 50 percent in Unicode and non-English and less than 50 percent North American. This is good, but, as you know, there is still work to be done.

Ashley and Daniel proved that their pilot program to use instant messaging for reference questions in their large academic library quickly and significantly raised the pass rate of their university's most at-risk students. Their leader, Nancy, pushed it through the entire university quickly campus-wide. Our SLA colleague, Randy, has done similar work using *Facebook* for research in nanotechnology. Openness to the opportunities in new technologies is a hallmark of our profession.

Cindy, Pat, Jill, Kitty, Barbara, Lori, Stacey, and more of us are proving that *Second Life* is a great place to experiment, learn, and discover. Please visit SLA's *Second Life* island. I gave my first speech in there for SLA in December. Other SLA members are den mothers to hundreds of peach-fuzz-faced programmers building amazing gaming environments. Hey, of course, librarians are even into gaming, the world's largest publishing activity!

Lastly, SLA and the EPA [US Environmental Protection Agency] librarians have advocated for and protected the environmental collections and our combined knowledge of global warming and pollution from the threat from closure and destruction under the policy direction of the Bush presidency. Others of your SLA colleagues prevented the POPLINE database from using "abortion" as a stop word for political reason. We, all of you, protect freedom of access to information for all. We understand the power of technology to create greater access as well as to limit access in scary ways.

All of these folks are just a few of your special librarian colleagues. They come with an SLA membership as part of your global network. We are a global professional network and a bottomless profession. No matter how deep you go, you'll always find more depth. Every librarian has hundreds of moments of truth and impacts every week to share. I remind you that thousands of your colleagues in the profession toil every day to save lives, improve public policy, support creativity and research, invent the future, cure disease, support learners, teach future librarians, challenge poverty and ignorance, and shine the light of information and knowledge everywhere.

So, I leave you with this—DREAM BIG. There's no excuse. Your impact is so great and powerful that it would be immoral not to make your dreams come true. SLA is there for you on an international basis to help you with those dreams and making a difference in the world. Live and learn. Network and enjoy. Say "yes" every chance you get. Put yourself in the way of being asked to volunteer. Say "yes" to SLA and more. Be part of the change you want to see. Choose to have an impact, an important impact.

No excuses.

We are participating in the creation of nothing short of an improved information and knowledge ecology. If we believe we can, we will. Don't let the bumps get you down.

If not us, then who?