

A Guide to Change Management Using the SARAH Model

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Applying the SARAH Model to Library Change Management

Abstract

Academic libraries are the heart of colleges and universities and, as such, are often centrally involved in and impacted by changes in the greater higher education landscape. For those working in these spaces, familiarity with strategies for managing change is essential to support yourself and others during especially turbulent times. The SARAH model, described below in bullet points with our modifications in brackets, offers a memorable way to understand responses to change, be they our own or others.

S - Shock or Surprise

A – Anger [Anxiety, Alert, or Anticipation]

R – Resistance or Rejection [Re-engagement, or Rationalization]

A - Acceptance

H - Help or Hope

This is not an inevitable cycle and some people may not move through the stages in a linear manner. The existing model offers structure, but our addition adds flexibility, opportunities for positive reactions, and library-specific examples and context. This model, and our modifications to it, helps individuals identify their own or others reaction to change, recognize where they might be in the process, and respond with empathy and support. By understanding feelings and reactions of ourselves and others, we can provide thoughtful and intentional support during difficult times.

United by their shared name, the Sara(h)s of ELD bring together their diverse experiences and perspectives to present the SARAH model for use in academic libraries, and particularly for those working with Engineering or STEM departments. This paper and poster will present the SARAH model alongside strategies and examples for supporting both yourself and others when managing change in a library context.

Keywords: change management, university libraries, SARAH model

Introduction

Organizational change is ever present and it is therefore useful for librarians to consider models that help us all understand and navigate organizational change, whether we are impacted by change beyond our control or the ones driving those changes. Organizational change can bring up big emotions across many stakeholders, and the SARAH model, in bullet points below with our modifications in brackets, is a framework for understanding and responding to workplace changes [1], [2], [3].

S - Shock or Surprise

A – Anger [Anxiety, Alert, or Anticipation]

R – Resistance or Rejection [Re-engagement, or Rationalization]

A - Acceptance

H - Help or Hope

This model is about some of those emotions we all may feel when confronted with major changes. There is nothing shameful about the emotions in this SARAH model or any other model. It is okay to have these feelings and to feel them deeply.

The SARAH model is not a perfect or universal model; that is, people will not necessarily travel through all the emotional states in a particular order and they may experience emotions not listed in the model. Still, the model can be a useful framework to contemplate and engage with if one is leading a library through change, whether in an official capacity or as a leader in any other sense of the word. If those leading changes notice that the emotions of people affected by organizational upheaval match the pattern in the SARAH model, they can potentially anticipate the next emotional states, or at least prepare for these states. One could design practice exercises with a team of people charged with leading change (e.g. an exercise such as The SARAH Cycle [1]). How the group and in particular the leaders understand these emotions and communicate and manage through change based on their understanding of these emotions in each phase of the model can impact the success of working through that change.

In this paper, we review the literature on change management in academic libraries, we provide context around librarian burnout, discuss trauma-informed approaches to library work, and other organizational changes such as faculty status shifts. These elements can all drive how a stakeholder in a library change process understands and reacts to that change. Finally we share two library-based case studies, new rules for faculty status promotion requirements and branch library closures, that indicate how accounting for and engaging with the SARAH model can smooth these often inevitable change processes.

Literature Review

Change management in academic libraries

Institutional change is ubiquitous and factors such as globalization and technological advancement have further accelerated the pace of organizational change in the last several decades [4]. Further factors such as recurring budget shortfalls and the widespread adoption of AI technology all but guarantee that institutions will need to continually plan for change in order to survive [5].

As organizations confront these challenges, managers turn to change management. Change management is a structured process designed to support organizational transition and designed to help employees accept institutional changes [6]. It is widely studied and contains a diversity of proposed theoretical models and applied techniques. While there is little evidence to suggest that one model of change management is more effective than others, there are strategies that appear consistently across multiple models including transparent communication, involving employees at all levels, taking into consideration organizational values and culture, and providing stakeholder incentives and support for the change [5].

Academic libraries are institutions as prone to the modern drivers of change as any other organization and, therefore, no stranger to the use of change management. Budget cuts are an unfortunately common challenge, however applying effective change management techniques ultimately helped one library to mitigate the potentially demoralizing effects of rightsizing with a proactive approach [7]. Many academic libraries have taken the proactive approach of modernizing their physical space and collections to more visually meet the learning and research needs of university stakeholders. In addition, libraries reported more favorable institutional outcomes, such as avoiding steep budget cuts, when senior university administration had good relationships with the libraries [8]. While these changes help the modern academic library to survive, and, in some cases, thrive, employee reaction to these changes can be quite negative. Effective change management helps to mitigate these feelings and improve the overall outcome of implementing the changes. One key to effective management is understanding the emotional impact of change and actively working to reduce its impact.

SARAH model/grief process

The SARAH model is a variant of the Kübler-Ross Change Curve [9, p. 383]. This model for emotional responses to change is modeled from Kübler-Ross's 5 Stages of Grief®. Business scholars have used the concept of organizational death and stages of grief as a model to understand and propose frameworks to ameliorate negative emotional responses to these major changes. Change models, including grief or emotion models, can be limited in their ability to address the complexity of major organizational changes [10]. However, there is evidence that individuals experiencing major changes in higher education settings do still experience some or all stages of Kubler-Ross's grief model [11]. Models can be helpful, as they provide frameworks

for navigating strategies like scenario planning and manager training, which can lead to better responses from individuals impacted by changes [12]. However, it is important to remember that these models provide a framework, and that individual responses vary. In particular, change without clear communications and explanations tend to have a negative emotional response akin to feelings of loss and grief [13].

Using these models can help library workers responsible for communicating changes implement more empathetic and effective communication strategies. They can also help provide language and structure for those impacted by change when sharing their feelings and reactions. This paper adds to this existing body of literature by presenting a change management model applied specifically in library settings.

The remaining sections of the literature review provide context for changes and challenges in the field of librarianship, such as burnout, trauma, and librarian faculty status, and explores trauma-informed leadership as a guiding framework to illustrate the SARAH model and provide context for the cases presented later in the paper.

Academic librarian burnout

When institutions themselves become the source of trauma whilst carrying the institutional memory of trauma [14], it “highlight[s] the link between abusive leadership and burnout in academic librarians” [15]. Institutions “that provide trauma-informed support can also be trauma-inducing, resulting in unintentional re-traumatization of individuals” [16], including a clash of trauma-informed principles with systemic inequity and power [16], as well as toxic leadership, and constant unsettling change [14]. Burnout can have short and long-term negative effects on the emotional and physical well-being of individuals, and common emotional responses to these events include shock, confusion, anger, and anxiety [15].

Burnout is a process associated with low morale and can be exacerbated by “trigger events” [15] resulting in trauma responses that “can encompass several different life experiences, including grief” [17], and post-traumatic stress. Trigger events that result in low morale are “often triggered by an unexpected negative event, or relationship, including fast-paced changes in the workplace such as changes in library leadership or staffing, changes in campus leadership, or incompatible individual work relationships” [15]. Employee burnout could very well be a symptom of individual burnout which may be a reflection of the overall dysfunction of the organization. The burnout of the individual can thus contribute to ongoing workplace dysfunction [18]. And, as Doucette and Tolley state, “altering the organization’s policies, procedures, and practices to reflect a trauma-responsive posture promises relief from the circumstances those working in academic libraries experience, like low morale” [19].

Trauma-informed librarianship

The American Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines a trauma-informed approach as one in which a program, organization, or system recognizes the widespread impact of trauma, understands pathways to recovery, identifies signs and symptoms of trauma, integrates trauma knowledge into policies and practices, and actively works to prevent re-traumatization [20]. This framework outlines the three “E’s” of trauma: event(s), experience of events, and effect of those events on individuals:

“Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” [20].

Within the context of trauma-informed librarianship, Tolley [21] describes trauma-informed care as a framework for understanding and responding to psychological trauma. Implementation involves both increased individual compassion and responsiveness as well as systemic changes to practices and procedures.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in collaboration with SAMHSA, outline a trauma-informed approach based on the following six guiding principles [20]:

1. **Safety:** Prioritize physical and emotional safety across all interactions and spaces.
2. **Trustworthiness and Transparency:** Build trust through transparency in organizational practices and decision-making.
3. **Peer Support:** Use shared experiences to foster support and build connections that reinforce trust and healing.
4. **Collaboration and Mutuality:** Emphasize the importance of shared power, making clients and employees feel they are active participants.
5. **Empowerment, Voice, and Choice:** Recognize individuals' strengths, promote autonomy, and respect diverse perspectives.
6. **Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues:** Actively seek to be responsive to and respectful of cultural and individual differences.

Lema et al. add “the six trauma-informed principles are broad enough for individuals and organizations to consider their professional expertise, scope, role, and knowledge about trauma in order to be trauma-informed with others, including patrons, colleagues, and themselves” [16].

Trauma-informed approaches in libraries acknowledges the potential for librarians to have experienced trauma and aims to create an environment that is understanding, respectful, and supportive. By implementing trauma-informed practices, libraries can ensure that their spaces

and services promote healing, resilience, and inclusivity, enhancing the overall well-being of their employees and patrons alike.

Adopting a trauma-informed approach and trauma-responsive programs and trainings should be a collaborative, ongoing commitment embedded into all aspects of our work, rather than a performative measure [22] and “should be considered and applied through a systemic lens as well as a library organization and library worker’s scope of practice” [16].

A trauma-informed approach does not require administration or employees to act as therapists. It should instead guide how institutions engage with their employees on a day-to-day basis. As Harris and Falot [23] explain, trauma-informed services are not intended to treat trauma; rather, they are designed to operate in ways that are welcoming and responsive to the needs of trauma survivors.

Tolley [21] similarly notes that trauma-informed care involves treating everyone as though they may have experienced trauma, helping to reduce stigma. In an institutional context, this means organizations are not expected to identify which employees are trauma survivors, but to structure policies, practices, and interactions with the understanding that anyone might be. In more recent works, Tolley [24] notes the importance of management having self-awareness about childhood traumas, recognizing the potential for power imbalances, engaging in trauma-informed education, and taking more trauma-responsive action towards a healthier workplace.

Gray [25] suggests that as society prioritizes mental health, so too do libraries undergoing change need to adapt and apply strategies for managing change in a way that prioritizes mental health. “The shift towards mental health awareness is no longer optional but a necessity” [25]. Additionally, Tolley offers practical ways in which libraries undergoing change can be more trauma responsive to their staff. These include managers actively sharing power through collective consultations, and setting up alternative ways to submit anonymous feedback, and ideas, or shifting the power to the librarians by way of active listening and follow through [24].

Although Tolley [21] outlines a more comprehensive three-year implementation plan for a trauma-informed approach, many organizational changes occur more rapidly and require a more immediate response. Libraries can respond more practically by hiring experts to design and deliver employee training programs based on their local context [16], employee needs, and availability. These educational opportunities should be ongoing and operationalized from a place of care rather than liability through an assessment of local policies [16].

Controversy and Changes in Library Faculty Status

For decades academic librarians have been classified as both staff and faculty, depending on an institution’s policies and priorities. ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries) endorses a standard for academic librarians as faculty, comprising of eight categories: professional responsibilities, governance, compensation and contracts, promotion and tenure,

professional development and research/scholarship funds, academic freedom, dismissal or termination, and grievance/appeals process [26]. Faculty status and not just academic status can bring multiple benefits to academic librarians as ACRL's standard highlights from salary to job satisfaction.

Throughout the literature there is a trend of continued debate or controversy as faculty status increases responsibilities of academic librarians without all the benefits of standard tenure/tenure-track faculty [27], [28], [29], [30], [31]. Faculty status for academic librarians started being considered at some institutions as far back as 1911, while it took until the 1970's for ACRL to consider endorsing faculty status [27], [28]. A common question by those setting these standards was "are we librarians only, scholars or authors, or some fuzzy combination of all three?" [27].

There are significant benefits to having faculty status as academic librarians since this can enhance departmental partnerships and collaborations, including information literacy teaching sessions [29]. Librarians are also more likely to respond to changes within a discipline when performing research in that area, a common feature of faculty librarian roles. However, this might be offset by the time not spent on a librarian's core duties since some institutions where librarians publish more (a concern for ACRL endorsement originally), the overall research output of an institution can decrease [27], [29]. This would seem to imply that publishing responsibilities should be considered carefully to ensure all duties of a faculty librarian can be covered.

Each institution also typically implements their own version of faculty status that does not always conform completely to the ACRL standards and adopt their own options for faculty responsibilities [31]. A key survey of over 300 Carnegie research institutions in 1989 showed that service was required by 97 percent, while only 20 percent required publications (most only encouraged) [28]. Some institutions also offer a dual track system for their library faculty where some are closer to tenure-track and others a professional practice-type track [30], [31]. Academic institutions sometimes even adopt a tenure-track or similar for their librarians, but later might take it away or the reverse, or simply impose additional requirements [31], [32]. Overall, institutions pick their own systems and change them without any consistency besides most requiring a MLS (now MLIS) [33].

Academic librarians, especially those in engineering, might find faculty status advantageous for their jobs and should be aware of the disadvantages to better serve their departments. As there is no widely used practice such as the 50/40/10 for research/teaching/service typically seen in tenure-track, faculty status will continue to be a subject of debate and possible to change at a whim from administrations, impacting engineering librarians at any institution. Like trauma-informed librarianship and burnout in academic libraries, changes require supporting employee

needs. The SARA model is one option to assist in supporting librarians through the multitude of changes that can come their way.

SARA Model

The literature describes various iterations of the SARA (or, less commonly, SARA) model, with letters meaning similar but not exactly the same concepts. We synthesized several of these and, as described below, offer our additions in the context of our experiences navigating library change.

S - Shock or Surprise

The initial reaction to coping with negatively perceived organizational change, represented by the letter S in the SARA model, is shock or surprise. This reaction is believed to happen for a number of reasons. In libraries, for example, seasoned staff often perceive some change initiatives to be a threat to their tested, established ways of working. At this stage, people are often resistant to acknowledging that a significant change is taking place. While sometimes this may manifest as outright denial, it also can take the form of believing that the change is doomed to fail and thus temporary in nature or there will be no large tangible impact from the change [34].

Ultimately, the state of shock or surprise serves to help the brain deal with a heavy emotional response. It takes time for the mind to process and adapt to a new reality and this initial stage helps to provide a protective buffer [35].

A - Anger, Anxiety, Alert, or Anticipation

The first A of the SARA model presents two possible reactions that may happen after initial shock or surprise: a negative reaction of anxiety and anger or less negative feelings of increased alertness or anticipation.

After the initial surprise or shock reaction, impacted individuals may react with anger or anxiety. These types of responses can lead to resistance to change in the workspace. Those feelings of anger or anxiety may also impact them at home [34]. The anger may be focused on the change itself or, often, on the person communicating the change.

Typically, the SARA model includes only anger or anxiety as the emotional reactions to change. The authors propose additional framings in the context of library change. Specifically, we offer the possibilities of anticipation or alertness. Adequate communication during periods of change can help affected individuals feel involved in the change and help to mediate negative

feelings [36]. In these situations, those impacted may react positively and continuing conversation can help to maintain the optimistic response.

R - Resistance, Rejection, Re-engagement, or Rationalization

The R of the SARAH model can stand for two concepts: resistance and rejection or re-engagement or rationalization.

When people are in a state of resistance or rejection, while they may recognize that the change will happen no matter their feelings, they do not actively or willingly engage with the change [37]. This can be a low point, emotionally, for the group going through change, and managing a group through this emotion can be pivotal to the success of the change process.

While the traditional SARAH Model includes only the negative responses of resistances or rejection, the authors propose positive reactions as well. Another meaning for R could be re-engagement or even rationalization. If people are in this emotional state, they may not be excited or feeling positively about the change. Still, they may be open to having conversations about the change and trying new organizational structures, workflows, or tools associated with the change [34].

A - Acceptance

The second A of the SARAH model stands for acceptance.

In both the Kübler-Ross 5 Stages of Grief®, and SARAH models, the acceptance stage marks the point where denial and resistance stop, emotions settle, and integration of the change begins [35]. Acceptance is the stage where the reality of the situation is fully acknowledged, and it has reached the stage of “it is what it is” [2] where change can take place, and there is no more struggle against grief.

Acceptance does not mean agreement. Acceptance involves recognizing the situation as valid, and empathizing or asking questions and choosing to engage with the process [1]. From this stage, decisions are made, change is integrated, and constructive action and forward plans can begin.

H - Help or Hope

The H of the SARAH model stands for help or hope. In the SARAH model, hope is seen as the point where changes are confined to the past and we are looking for opportunities to get help and find hope [2]. In this state people may see the positive side of change and perhaps better understand how this change might be beneficial. Hope is an important attribute of emotional intelligence and can also help minimize apathy [38]. It is up to the individual at this stage to manage their emotions and cope with change. Some organizations may recognize the need to

support this stage by offering workshops or resources to help people maintain their emotional state [39].

It is worth noting, some variations of the SARA model do not include the Help/Hope step. In these cases, acceptance is seen as the final stage which includes steps such as pursuing additional training or seeking guidance on improvement [3].

Case Studies

With this introduction to the SARA model, the authors present two case studies for readers to explore and better understand how this model might be used in the context of institutional change. These models are examples - the authors encourage the readers to use them as a starting point for incorporating this model into their own library practice.

Changes in Faculty Status at Academic Libraries

In the past several years there have been multiple academic libraries evaluating the status of their employees, particularly within the domain of faculty status. Some institutions have pushed library faculty closer to tenured status in their jobs, while others have pushed their librarians to staff positions. In most cases there are university strategic plans or priorities involved and many times the librarians themselves are not consulted. Even if consulted somewhat in advance, the SARA model is useful for describing the reactions and processes of the academic librarians involved.

One current case is from a R1, land-grant university (Virginia Tech) where university strategic plans dictate increasing the “quality, quantity, and prominence of our scholarship” [40]. Virginia Tech’s library faculty were surprised to be included in these publishing goals as only part of their faculty (about one third) are even on a parallel tenure-track path, not true tenure-track called “continued appointment” [41]. This culminated in August 2025 with the action of all parallel track library faculty being reclassified as teaching/research faculty instead of professional faculty [42]. One faculty member up for promotion to associate was caught by these shifting standards, initially being denied their rank change (similar to Idaho State University over a decade ago [32]). Another faculty member was recommended not to go up for professor the next year due changes in what research and publications would count for promotion. Since the library administration did not respond effectively per the opinion of the provost’s office, those outside the library started to set guidance for the related to research and promotion that would apply to library faculty. Although standards are still shifting related to promotion, communication between the library and provost’s office has improved significantly compared to last August.

Incorporating the SARA model can help those in and out of leadership roles to understand the holistic impact of changes tied to employment like promotion and tenure. Those preparing for

promotion in the near future may be feeling shock or surprise (S), and also perhaps anxiety, anger, alertness, or anticipation (A). Increased communication and clearly defining new requirements may help to mitigate this response. Creating formal and informal opportunities for impacted individuals to come together and to discuss and support each other during the period of change may also help support those impacted by changes. As individuals become accustomed to the change, some people may have begun to re-engage (R) with the process, participate in discussions with library leadership, and may be able to consider delaying going up for review if the changes to promotion criteria are significant. With support, library faculty on tenure-track or similar systems can feel acceptance (A) of the new system. If not, these library faculty will continue to move around the SARAH model as the system continues to shift. Ideally, these changes should facilitate increased campus visibility and respect for library faculty, generating hope (H) that the changes will be a long-term positive change for the library.

Library Closures and Moves

Many academic libraries experience the need to close branches or make major collection moves. While this case study centers on one author's experience with the emotions around a major branch library closing, the story resonates with other authors' experiences at their current and previous institutions as well.

At one author's previous place of work, a small liberal arts college, the Science Center on campus was scheduled to be completely gutted and renovated. In the year-long planning process, leadership (beyond and also including library leadership) at the institution decided that the Science Library branch located in that building would close so that space could be repurposed to support STEM instruction and research in new and innovative ways. The library team tasked with managing the subsequent planning work required in closing a branch, assessing the collections, integrating some materials into a main branch, and de-accessioning other materials did experience several of the emotional states in the SARAH model, but mostly sat with feelings of acceptance and hope. Staff were not being let go and it was an interesting project to work on.

The library team working on this project communicated with faculty at major milestones and shared information regularly about the process, however the possibility of deaccessioning materials caused many STEM faculty to oscillate between feelings of shock, anger, and resistance for much of the planning process. Indeed, though it was clear in communications that faculty could identify items they wished to "save" that would either be held in the main library or in offsite storage, the feelings of sadness and anxiety over the fate of the books caused some to overlook and even ignore these communications. The STEM liaison librarian had one faculty member in tears at one point. Slowly, through calm, often one on one and small group conversations, the STEM liaison librarian was able to work with faculty to move them into re-engagement, and sometimes even acceptance. Some faculty did indeed submit title lists, and the library team honored those requests. In the end, several years after the new science center

opened, faculty are now in the hopeful phase: they are happy with the library collection and ecstatic about their new building with cutting edge facilities and critical student-supporting inclusive social, study, and reflection spaces.

The library team working on this project did not know about the SARAH model at the time. The authors of this paper suggest that when changes like this are occurring, having a sense of the emotional states library workers *and* patrons could be experiencing is quite useful for the change agents. With this understanding, communications could be planned in thoughtful ways that anticipate those (often initial) stages of shock, sadness, anger, and resistance.

The library team also had no significant training explicitly in trauma-informed approaches to working with colleagues and patrons. For institutions embarking on large library projects like branch closures, significant deaccessioning projects, etc., that involve strong feelings from patrons and staff alike, developing a culture of trauma-informed approaches could be deeply impactful. Trauma-informed processes do not magically happen after one webinar or training session (see the 250+ page *Trauma-Informed Organizational Change Manual* [22]). Still, individual and small series of professional development activities can absolutely be valuable and inspire lasting changes to codes of conduct, processes like onboarding, and overall communications strategies [16]. The authors suggest that libraries that integrate trauma-informed approaches could weave in the SARAH model as well as they think about stakeholders involved in and affected by major changes like branch closures in their spaces.

Conclusion

The SARAH model describes some common emotional reactions from stakeholders when organizations navigate change. Academic libraries, and the higher educational institutes they sit in, are sites of constant change. These changes can show up in library processes and procedures, spaces, services, or even the broader higher education context and landscape. There is value in change-drivers and change-makers considering the SARAH model to plan ahead and anticipate emotional responses of library workers, patrons, and others.

We hope that the description of the SARAH model and the case studies shared in this work bring peace and hope to those reading this article. Whether it is from trauma, administrators, burnout, and much more, the SARAH model can be a guide to how we process these changes. As employees in a service industry it is necessary to process these changes to continue doing what libraries do well - serve our patrons.

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