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**Perceptions of empowerment and the  
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## **DECLARATION**

The opinions expressed in this dissertation are solely those of the author and acceptance of the dissertation as a contribution to the award of a degree cannot be regarded as constituting approval of all its contents by the Division of Information & Communication Studies.

This dissertation is the sole work of the author, and is developed from a research proposal submitted by the author as part of the second year of the Master in Information Studies.

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# ABSTRACT

## PERCEPTIONS OF EMPOWERMENT AND THE PITFALLS OF COMMUNICATION: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TRIESTE LIBRARY SYSTEM

STEFANIA ARABITO

The management of change has become a top priority in academic libraries. A viable model is the learning organization, as it aims at enhancing the capacity of the staff at all levels for innovation and growth.

This study investigates the relations between empowerment – considered to be the hub of this management practice - and communication – considered to be a strategic imperative in participative organizations.

The research questions were:

- ✓ How do the Library System staff feel about empowerment?
- ✓ How do library directors feel about empowerment?
- ✓ How can communication affect empowerment practices?

Both empowerment and communication are amply described in the literature as being context-bound, multi-faceted and multi-dimensional concepts, which can only be explored in a given environment from a constructivist perspective and with no *a priori* assumptions.

This is accordingly an exploratory case study, based on a qualitative approach and on intensity sampling. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews (with library directors), mini focus groups (with the staff), and observations of meetings (of the Library System steering committee).

Cross-analysis showed that there was common ground to build on through adequate negotiation, such as the aspiration for a people-centred organization and the importance of having a project and a vision.

Both empowerment and communication, however, leave room for pitfalls and may create divisiveness if organizational communication is deficient and defective.

Strategic and interpersonal communication turned out to have a fundamental role in building up the trust that makes empowerment practices possible by overcoming “us and them” feelings, local subcultures and defensive behaviours. The Library System should offer opportunities for meeting and exchanging opinions, sharing the vision, and developing a common sense of belonging and ownership.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ICT	Information and communication technologies
LIS	Library and information science
LS	Library System
OPAC	Online Public Access Catalogue

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# 1 OVERVIEW

## 1.1 Introduction

This is a qualitative study aimed at exploring how empowerment was perceived by the librarians working within an Italian academic library system and how communication impacted on their perception.

The starting assumption was that the pace of change within academic libraries has been escalating following the relentless technological innovations and social transformations. In order to survive an ever changing setting, and to achieve quality in a competing environment, academic libraries must put into practice effective strategies to manage change. This has become a top priority issue for library management.

Among the numerous organizational frameworks within the literature of change, the researcher identified a viable model to apply to academic libraries, and specifically Peter Senge's learning organization (1990). In his view, the people that make up an organization should pursue five disciplines, namely systems thinking, personal mastery, shared vision, team learning, and mental models. The aim is to enhance the capacity of the staff at all levels for innovation and growth through continuous learning and transformation.

The researcher had previously conducted a literature review to discover whether this model had been applied to Italian academic libraries. The body of literature mainly referred to libraries in the United States. Similar studies carried out in Italy mainly focused on training programmes; it was also observed that Italian librarians were more prone to theoretical and technical stances, and rather sceptical towards implementing things which were perceived as management fads. It was immediately clear that different contexts heavily affected the perception, behaviour and practices of librarians.

The researcher espoused the statement below, which sums up the true spirit of the learning organization:

*"Beyond high philosophy and grand themes lie the gritty details of practice." (Garvin, 1993, 78)*

The researcher considered that the learning organization revolved around the concept of empowerment, as this was identified as the true prerequisite for

*“people [to] continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire”* (Senge, 1990, 2).

The dynamics and relationships between the leadership styles of library directors and the perceptions of empowerment of their subordinates emerged as a controversial issue in literature, and seemed to be worth exploring in an Italian academic library context.

The researcher chose to undertake an exploratory case study, based on a qualitative approach, as the aim was to investigate contemporary events in a real-life context (Yin, 2003b). The main unit of analysis was the University of Trieste Library System<sup>1</sup>.

As frequently happens in qualitative inquiry, the design of the research was modified to some extent while collecting data and the researcher partially rephrased and refocused the research questions.

In fact, a paradigm shift occurred when it became apparent that not only subordinates but also directors had strong feelings about their own empowerment. This assumption partially steered the research to a new course. The researcher had initially supposed that training was especially related to empowerment and that communication was somehow incidental. The first data pointed exactly to the opposite direction.

## **1.2 Context**

### **1.2.1 The University of Trieste**

*““This is an organisation of learning, but is it a learning organisation?” (University Staff Development Officer).” (Edwards & Walton, 2000)*

The “Scuola Superiore di commercio” (High Business School) of Trieste was established in 1877 and was appointed the status of University by royal decree in 1924. The University of Trieste is therefore a comparatively young institution in the Italian higher education landscape. It is considered to be a medium-sized University (27,000 students, 12 faculties, 800 administrative and technical staff and 2,000 academics and researchers). It suffers from the main illnesses that seem to afflict Universities worldwide: *“defensive patterns (e.g. isolation and polarized thinking) and other forms of self-protective behaviours”*, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Hence LS.

*“fragmentation”* which is a consequence of *“specialization”* and hinders *“attempts to create a shared vision”* (Froman, 1999, 186-187).

The organizational trend within Universities should be directed instead toward *“boundarylessness”* (Froman, quoting Garvin, 1999, 187), but the faculties seem less quick to respond than the libraries (Bender, 1997, 22):

*“The libraries of colleges and universities are changing faster than their respective parent institutions.” (Riggs, 1997b, 3)*

A possible explanation is that

*“librarians tend to think in a campus-wide mode more regularly than the faculty, who are more often locked into their discipline-related activities.” (Mech, 1996, 349)*

Oddly enough, such considerations apply to Italian academic libraries too (Bellini, 1997; Romeo, 2000; Vannucci, 1999; Vannucci, 2000).

### **1.2.2 The University of Trieste libraries**

The General Library was founded within the University campus to serve the whole University population. It had both a special bibliographic collection and general collections. At that time the University had developed from the former Business School and faculties gradually grew up in different parts of the town. Around them were developed several small libraries belonging to the different academic institutes. They were relatively autonomous, but relied on the General Library for specialized tasks such as cataloguing. They mainly served didactic purposes. When academic departments were established for research purposes, specialized libraries were born to support research. As a rule they offered no real services and curiously enough they had no librarians (unlike most Italian Universities). Administrative staff belonging to the departments carried out purchasing and budgeting, while academics themselves decided on the development of the collections. As departments were highly independent institutions, department libraries followed their own ways, and were subject to the fancies and whims of the academic staff.

As can be easily understood, the lack of central organization meant a waste of resources and no shared vision or policy. There was already a general

catalogue, as all the activities related to cataloguing were under the control of qualified librarians working in non-departmental libraries.

### **1.2.3 The University of Trieste Library System**

In Italy academic library systems were set up in the nineties to rationalize the resources and services of academic libraries. The University of Trieste LS was established in 1995.

As one of the “eldest” library directors interviewed put it,

*“The regulation was held up by the Academic Senate... it was approved in June, nay, May 1995, it became effective as from June, but the library directors had been appointed before that.”*

The LS became more and more autonomous and was always coordinated by a chief librarian. Its aim was to manage all its resources (budget and staff) more efficiently, to monitor quality standards by supervising faculty and department libraries, and to offer quality services to their users. Library automation (within the project called Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale, i.e. the National Library Service) started in the meantime and was initially limited to cataloguing. The LS was (and still is) the system manager of the local hub of the National Library Service and started cooperation with an increasing number of libraries within the region.

It was in 2001, with the second wave of automation, that all the activities of the libraries belonging to the LS were fully automated.

At the time of the research, the LS was undergoing major transformations. Another regulation was pending, and was being held up again by the academic boards. In the past ten years several former department libraries had become part of the LS, and only few libraries still formally belonged to departments.

The LS mirrored the University organizational structure. It was a divisional system, based on a role culture, wherein the LS corresponded to a department - supervised by a coordinator - with twelve sub-units corresponding to twelve different branch libraries – headed by directors (whose position power varied according to local organizational subcultures). Actually branch libraries still had very different organizational climates, and priorities were set according to the local traditions and values. Subcultures were even stronger in department libraries that were becoming part of the LS. There were few centralized

services, though, which reported directly to the coordinator.

The LS was coordinated both at a strategic and at an operative level by the LS steering committee, which was made up of the library directors, the LS coordinator and the LS administrative supervisor.

The LS staff belonged to two categories: C for librarians who were qualified but had no managerial position, and D for library directors. The coordinator was the only librarian belonging to highly professional staff (EP). There were also administrative and computing staff working within the LS.

### **1.3 Purpose of the study**

It seemed worthwhile carrying out a study to investigate the relations between empowerment and communication within the LS, as there was lack of literature analyzing these issues in Italian academic libraries. As mentioned above, similar case studies were mainly conducted in the United States.

These themes proved to be culture and context bound, and the status of Italian librarians and the history of Italian academic libraries were completely different from that of the Anglo-Saxon countries.

The aims and objectives of the research are listed below:

#### **1.3.1 Aims**

- To probe the feelings towards empowerment of the LS staff and the library directors
- To explore the relationships between communication and empowerment

#### **1.3.2 Objectives**

- To investigate the meanings and determinants of empowerment, delegation, and autonomy according to the LS staff and library directors
- To probe their commitment and motivation in this respect
- To discover the kind of communication that best served the purposes of empowerment

#### **1.3.3 Significance of the study**

The researcher had a personal, strong motivation for doing this study. Mistrust generally surrounds the viability of management theories in the Italian public

sector. Moreover, Italian librarians are traditionally snobbish about managerial practices, especially when they come from the United States.

This study aimed at exploring the combination of what had been considered two basic determinants of the learning organization from within the library system of an Italian University, i.e. from a new perspective. It will hopefully add a small piece to the body of literature and be of interest to a scholarly audience.

As in the present ever changing environment librarians need to apply reflective practice to problem solving (Dixon, 2000), the researcher especially hopes that this study will provide useful hints and fresh ideas to Italian practitioners.

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## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 *Change and academic libraries*

*“The only certainty is change ... this is especially so in the library and information services sector.”  
(Smith, 2003, 443)*

In the past academic libraries were used to a stable environment and to “*captive clients*” (Dworaczyk, quoting Goble & Brown, 2002, 36) especially in the public sector (Goldberg, 2000, 1). Such a stance cannot be taken any longer, as there is growing competitiveness among higher education institutions (Invernizzi, quoting Velo, 2000, 569) and customer expectations and lifestyles keep changing. Major issues are “*massification*” (Candy, 2000a) and the “*pressures for greater accountability as well as financial constraints*” (Froman, 1999, 185). The emphasis on privatization entails increasing pressure on the public administration to show efficiency while budgets keep shrinking:

*“To enhance effectiveness, achieve excellence, and ensure survival research library leaders need, in full collaboration with staff members, to develop conscious, explicit processes for organizational change.” (Lee, 1993, 129)*

The pace of change is accelerated in academic libraries, and brings about very concrete effects on library staffs and organizations (Shaughnessy, 1996, 252), owing to the “*heightened emphasis given to information access and knowledge management*” (Smith, 2003, 443), to “*a great deal of innovation in new technology*” (Fowler, 1997, 1), and to “*a continuous feedback from our customers about their information needs*” (Bender, 1997, 22). In other words,

*“Continuous change and improvement are directly linked to the tension between our vision of what needs to be accomplished, and the current reality as we attempt to create that vision.” (Bender, 1997, 22)*

On the one hand, the speed of technological innovation is having momentous consequences upon academic libraries, while on the other the impact of social transformations has been amplified through the great attention paid to user

needs.

This is the reason why University libraries have been running ahead, while their parent organizations have kept lagging behind. In fact academic libraries usually have “*a reasonable degree of autonomy*” and therefore can implement a learning organization program “*without [it] being part of a larger institutional effort*” (Worrell, 1995, 356). Sooner or later, however, this stirs up conflicts and mistrust within library and non-library members of staff, which are related to possible discriminations in terms of rewards and in-service training. These are all variants of the notorious “us and them” feelings, which disrupt the sense of belonging to the same institution.

Change can be painful and distressing, but it can become a powerful spur. In the past few years, the multiple facets and dimensions of organizational change have been the object of a theoretical discipline called “organizational theory”. The purpose is to describe and explain the behaviour of organizations and of the individuals within organizations from a theoretical viewpoint, drawing from sociology, economics, psychology, political science, and so on and so forth. Then management studies attempt to find practical solutions and models, and to put forward organizational frameworks that aim at internalizing change by using it as leverage for improving quality and introducing innovations.

Library and information science scholars have, not surprisingly, been showing growing interest in such issues (Dworaczyk, 2002, 28); on the other hand, library staff and managers are front-line practitioners, and often improvisers, of the management of change.

## **2.2 The learning organization**

*“Learning organizations are organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.”*  
(Senge, 1990, 2)

*“an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.”*  
(Garvin, 1993, 78)

One of the most challenging and stimulating models for librarians to “*internalize*

*change*” is the learning organization (Worrell, 1995, 356). Peter Senge’s seminal book *“The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization”* was published in 1990. It *“sold more than 650,000 copies, spawned a sequel “fieldbook” and gave birth to a worldwide movement”* (Webber, 1999).

*“The concept of the academic library as a learning organization is not new; library staff have depended on one another and the collective learning environment of the library and its closely associated constituencies for many years.” (Riggs, 1997a)*

Senge himself admitted drawing on many influences, namely on the earlier works of Donald Schön, Chris Argyris and Arie de Geus and on the theories of the Center for Organizational Learning at MIT. Senge *“resurrected their ideas”* and popularized the learning organization as a completely new approach to solving problems by seeing the larger picture, i.e. by taking a systemic view (Dworaczyk, 2002, 32). The concepts that make up the theory are *“an eclectic combination of elements from the quality movement, matrix management, systems theory, and organizational development and culture”*, but Senge *“combined them into a holistic theory of organizational effectiveness”* (Worrell, 1995, 356).

The fifth (and primary) discipline is systems thinking; the metaphor is borrowed from system dynamics, which looks at structure in terms of feedback interactions within a system.

It is worth noting that no more than three years after the publication of Senge’s best seller Shelley Phipps (1993), a librarian, reworked his theories by thoroughly applying them to a library environment.

The five disciplines are listed in the table below; next, a range of selected comments explaining the corollaries of every discipline.

**FIGURE 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FIVE DISCIPLINES**

DISCIPLINES	CHARACTERISTICS
Systems thinking (1)	The process of seeing the causal relationships between independent actions in an organization
Personal mastery (2)	The continual development of individual self-fulfillment and commitment to one’s aspirations
Shared vision (3)	The shared pictures of an organization that fosters commitment

	and buy-in
Team learning (4)	The practice of teams gaining new insights through dialogue
Mental models (5)	The deeply ingrained assumptions that influence how individuals understand the world

Source: Senge, 1990

**(1)** We are taught as children to break up complex problems into small parts in order to work out possible solutions. In learning organizations we must be able to see wholes and not smaller parts, as cause and effect in complex systems are not usually closely related in time and in space (Worrell, 1995; Riggs, 1997b; Froman, 1999; Baughman & Hubbard, 2001; Dworaczyk, 2002); otherwise we risk shifting problems from one part of the system to another.

**(2)** Every individual within the organization has to expand his/her own personal capacity to pursue the aims he/she deems important. The organizational environment encourages and supports personal development (Phipps, 1993; Baughman & Hubbard, 2001; Christopher, 2003). This discipline can be equated to the concept of empowerment (Flood, 1998).

**(3)** This discipline has to do with organizational culture and a new sense of leadership (Worrell, 1995; Riggs, 1997b; Jenkins, 2000; Baughman & Hubbard, 2001). It implies *“connecting and building the vision through sharing, dialogue, listening and helping others to co-create the vision”* (Senge, 1990, 32), and by no means mere *“formal” and “grudging” compliance to the “leader’s vision”* (Phipps, 1993, 32).

**(4)** Individual learning is the prerequisite for organizational learning, even though the latter does not necessarily follow from the former (Worrell, 1995; Rowley, 2000; Goldberg, 2000). A true learning organization has to break the defensive behaviours which as a rule cover up the really thorny issues (Froman, 1999). Collaboration and facilitation among members are to be enhanced (Baughman & Hubbard, 2001). A creative approach to problem solving implies risk taking and forgiving the mistakes that inevitably ensue by not creating a threatening atmosphere (Phipps, 1993, 33).

**(5)** Our mental models *“determine not only how we make sense of the world, but how we take action”* (Senge, 1990, 175). They consequently influence our behaviours, be it consciously or unconsciously (Baughman & Hubbard, 2001). They can lead to inertia or, on the contrary, encourage action. It is necessary to gain awareness of the differences between espoused theories and theories in

use (Phipps, 1993, 31).

By advocating libraries as learning organizations, we put forward a sort of cultural realignment:

*“Let’s give up the goal of getting information to people and let’s assume the goal of creating a learning organization for people who care that other people have information they need and want. This leaves great room for new and creative ways of thinking what librarianship is all about and transforming libraries to serve the ultimate cause of learning.” (Phipps, 1993, 37)*

Senge’s work must not be seen as another mere organizational theory; the five disciplines are meant to be practised, and the literature shows that in the United States they have provided academic libraries with a viable framework for experimenting new solutions and restructuring their organizations.

The change effort however should not be driven by authority (Senge, 1996), but by learning; libraries themselves should become *“an oasis for continuous learning”* (Riggs, 1997a).

Learning organizations do not merely have a mission; they are *“truly mission-based”*, and this means *that “the source of legitimate power in the organization is its guiding ideas”* and that everyone is required to *“think continuously”* (Senge, 1998).

Academic libraries, however, *“have been highly centralized and hierarchical in character, following the classical and scientific theories of management”* (Fowler, 1997, 12). Their organizational design has been rigid in terms of division of labour and areas of responsibilities (Riggs, 1997b).

All scholars agree that *“transformation in libraries calls for a transformation in leadership”* as libraries *“need leaders who design and build new paradigms, the libraries without walls”* and who *“create the learning processes”* while being lifelong learners themselves (Phipps, 1993, 20).

In order to become learning organizations and to create a climate conducive to learning academic libraries need flatter organizational structures (Penniman, 2000), where people *“are encouraged to work across boundaries”* (Riggs, 1997b, 4), *“decision making is decentralized”*, and the leader is *“a teacher, steward and designer of learning processes”* (Worrell, 1995, 354).

Decisions have to be made at the lowest possible level, and problems have to

be solved by those who are directly involved (Worrell, 1995; Bender, 1997; Riggs, 1997b; Dworaczyk, 2002). Structures become then more flexible and adaptive because *“chains of command are short”* (Rowley, 2000, 10).

Alas,

*“Leaders often apply band-aid fixes, such as teams, without implementing a change in their fundamental beliefs and organizational design.”  
(James, 2003, 46)*

Conversely team structures should not be superimposed onto a strictly hierarchical organization, otherwise they cannot be effective.

One of the main sources of conflict and misunderstanding seems to be the need for strong leadership on the one hand and the need for truly empowered teams on the other. If an organization wants to grow and develop, it is fundamental to be clear about who decides what, and what can be delegated to whom, and how. Leadership and empowerment become two sides of the same coin if the vision is shared by leaders and subordinates. The following concerns arise:

- leaders must be aware of their leadership style
- staff must be sure about what empowerment means (Bender, 1997, 21).  
On the other hand,
- leaders may be *“reluctant to yield control”*
- *“employees may have difficulty in working more independently”* (Worrell, 1995, 356).

The opinions of accredited scholars on the definitions and interrelations of leadership and empowerment differ to a great extent, and remain highly controversial:

*“Change has to start at the top because otherwise defensive senior managers are likely to disown any transformation in reasoning patterns coming from below.” (Argyris, 1991, 106)*

*“Isn’t it odd that we should seek to bring about less hierarchical and authoritarian organizational cultures through recourse to hierarchical authority?” (Senge, 1996)*

Furthermore flexibility and adaptability are needed, as the circumstances may require giving up or taking up power:

*“Every library staff member is expected to be a leader at times and a follower at other times...”  
(Baughman & Hubbard, 2001)*

Summing up,

*“The application of the five disciplines results in an empowered organization... with greater capacity for pursuing its mission and for adapting to change in the internal and external environment ...” (Christopher, 2003, 13)*

In Senge’s taxonomy, empowerment corresponds on the whole to personal mastery. It implies unleashing the human spirit, and unlocking individual potential. We are at the very top of Maslow’s (1987) pyramid of needs here, and at the core of the learning organization.

### **2.3 Empowerment**

Empowerment is an oft-used concept. It was originally associated to critical research, which focused on the empowerment of discriminated minorities, who suffered from injustice, and on their *“emancipatory consciousness”* (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, 140). The concept was then investigated from a wide variety of perspectives by psychologists, managers, teachers, sociologists and so on and so forth; quite amazingly, however,

*“No single, universally agreed on, definition of empowerment has been accepted within the literature.” (Klagge, 1998, 548)*

*“Rather, the term has been used to capture a family of somewhat related meanings.” (Siegall & Gardner, quoting Thomas & Velthouse, 2000, 704)*

If we look up the OED Online, we find the following:

*“(1) to invest legally or formally with power or authority; to authorize, license (2) to impart or bestow power to an end or for a purpose; to enable, permit (3) to gain or assume power over.”  
(Christopher, 2003, 1)*

It is immediately clear that in the first two instances there is an active party (the empowering leader) and a passive party (the empowered subordinate). The

third instance refers to an autonomous deed by which the empowered party empowers himself/herself and the position of the leader is somehow incidental. It is obvious that these different stances have different implications.

Quinn & Spreitzen (1997, 38) accordingly identify a “*mechanistic*” and an “*organic*” approach to empowerment. The former is associated to a “*top-down view*”, and consequently to “*delegation and accountability*”. The latter is associated to a “*bottom-up view*”, and consequently to “*risk-taking, growth, and change*”. These authors believe that successful empowerment requires “*the integration of both*” (Quinn & Spreitzen, 1997, 39).

Nevertheless, this comprehensive interpretation is not extensively shared.

Some stress the “organic” approach, and consider empowerment to be an individual achievement, whereby influence is gained over events which are significant to an organization (Foster-Fishman et al., quoting Fawcett et al., 1998, 508).

Others stress the “mechanistic” approach, whereby “*authority is delegated from those who have positional power*” (Klagge, quoting Patterson, 1998, 549.)

The literature shows that the term holds a complexity of denotations and connotations in the very language in which it was coined, and therefore “*empowerment can mean different things to different people*” (Foster-Fishman et al., 1998, 508).

It is worth noting that there is no Italian equivalent of empowerment, and that it is necessary to borrow the term from the English. This entails comprehension difficulties to an Italian audience, who is not always acquainted with the concept. In Italy the most commonly used term in this context is “delegation”, which however accounts only for the mechanistic approach, or else “autonomy”, which accounts only for the organic approach. Neither of the two has the richness and complexity of the English expression, which is epitomized by its root, “power”.

The variables that affect empowerment are the population targeted, the setting, and the point of time. This is why investigations are usually context-specific. Special attention must be given to personal histories, as individuals are also influenced by possible previous experiences of empowerment. It is therefore incorrect to start from the researcher’s preconceived notion of empowerment, which may clash with the ideas of the population under study, and it is

fundamental to take into account subcultures (Foster-Fishman *et al.*, 1998, *passim*).

Empowered people have a sense of “*impact, competence, meaningfulness, choice*” (Siegall & Gardner, quoting Thomas & Velthouse, 2000, 706) or quite similarly a “*sense of self-determination, meaning, competence, and impact*” (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997, 41).

This multidimensional conceptualization of empowerment is necessary to take into account the multiple facets of the term. Every unidimensional definition is inevitably inadequate, as each dimension adds a unique element (Spreitzer, Kizilos & Nason, 1997, 681; 696).

Empowerment is certainly a crucial issue in all “*people-centred entrepreneurial model[s]*” (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1995, 133), where emphasis is put on work satisfaction and intrinsic motivation (Spreitzer, Kizilos & Nason, 1997, 682).

The relentless environmental transformations require “*employees who can cope well with ambiguity, complexity, and change*” (Spreitzer, Kizilos & Nason, quoting Thomas & Velthouse, 679, 682), who are proactive, and have a sense of belonging. This is the real key to the success of an organization. People are its “*only true sustainable competitive advantage*” (Siegall & Gardner, 2000, 703). Unfortunately, they are usually “*the most underutilized resource in many libraries*” (Christopher, 2003, 1).

A threat to empowerment is unempowerment itself. Those who are not empowered cannot possibly empower anyone; they must first empower themselves (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997, 46-47). Of course they may want to be empowered, while not wanting others to be empowered (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997, 44). This may happen with middle managers, who possibly fear losing control, power, and their positions. They may subsequently delegate only hard or tricky tasks to their employees and “*scapegoat*” them instead of empowering them properly (Klagge, 1998, 555; 557).

On the other hand,

*“Yielding control should not be confused with abdication of responsibility.” (Christopher, 2003, 36)*

Consensus and clarity on “*roles*” (Siegall & Gardner, quoting Spreitzer, 2000, 706) and on “*expectations*” (Christopher, 2003, 11) are prerequisites for

empowerment.

Accordingly, many authors agree that the determinants of empowerment are sharing information and the vision, as well as a participative climate, based on teamwork (Siegall & Gardner, 2000, 706-707).

It has significantly been stated that in order to attain empowerment “*excellent communication*” is needed at an operative and a strategic level (Christopher, 2003, 11).

Conversely, factors which negatively affect empowerment are “*poor communication and network systems*” or “*strict, stuffy atmosphere, negative communication with or from management, and a lack of relevant information from management*” (Siegall & Gardner, quoting Conger & Kanungo, and Chiles & Zorn, 2000, 707).

## **2.4 Communication**

As evidenced by the recurrence of the term in the last two paragraphs of the previous section, communication is a strategic imperative in participative organizations. Indeed,

*“An empowered library requires effective individual and group communication.”  
(Christopher, 2003, 38)*

Present society apparently overemphasizes the importance of communication, and of information and communication technologies. Given the massive body of literature, the researcher considered only what had a direct impact on this study.

The root of the term “communication” is derived from the Latin “communion”, that is “to put something in common between people”, “to share something”.

According to the classical theories, signals are first transmitted by a sender to a receiver through a channel in a given context according to a code. Decoding the message entails ambiguities, multiple interpretations, and even misinterpretations. The comparative health or pathology of the communication process depends upon the communication competencies of those involved.

The systems approach to communication takes into account feedback, and describes communication as a two-way process where sender and receiver continuously switch their roles (Grandi, 2001, 15-29). This recalls the dynamics

of organic empowerment:

*“Management can support a climate where feedback is continuously exchanged: peer to peer, manager to employee, and employee to manager.” (Christopher, 2003, 13)*

The publication of *Pragmatics of human communication: a study of interactional patterns, pathologies, and paradoxes* (Watzlavick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967), a seminal book, represents a turning point in communication studies. It investigates the effects of communication on human behaviour, as opposed to syntax (which examines how information is transmitted) and to semantics (which analyzes the meanings). In the pragmatic perspective, communication equals behaviour and is dependent on context. Fruitful hints are provided by the famous five axioms which open the essay. Italian scholars have already given due attention to their implications in present library environments (Di Domenico & Rosco, 1998; Comba, 2002).

**FIGURE 2: THE FIVE AXIOMS OF PALO ALTO**

1	One cannot not communicate.
2	Every communication has a content-aspect and a relationship-aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a metacommunication.
3	The nature of a relationship is contingent upon the punctuation of the communicational sequences between the communicants.
4	Human beings communicate both digitally and analogically.
5	All communicational interchanges are either symmetrical or complementary, depending on whether they are based on equality or difference.

Source: Watzlavick, Beavin & Jackson, 1971

These statements open up our eyes on the main pitfalls of communication. The idea that whenever there are two or more people, there is communication - no matter whether there is any intention to communicate - makes communication a top priority issue in every organization. In communicational interactions, we must consider both the content (*“report”*) and the relationship between communicants (*“command”*). It is inevitable to think that the positions of the members of an organization influence their mutual interactions to varying degrees. Their relationships can then be peer-to-peer - when the behaviour of communicants is equivalent - or else *“one-up”* or *“one-down”* - when the behaviour of one communicant balances the behaviour of the other (Watzlavick, Beavin & Jackson, 1971, passim).

In hierarchical organizations, communication is almost exclusively vertical, and

particularly top down; in flatter organizations, communication is predominantly lateral, and when it is vertical it is both top down and bottom up (Dixon, 1998, 164).

The level of formality depends on the culture of the organization and determines the organizational climate (Di Domenico, 2004).

Communication can be face-to-face or distant, written or oral. The absence of non-verbal cues has to be compensated for, lest misunderstanding and even conflicts occur (Comba, 2002).

As a guru of organizational studies puts it,

*“The more virtual an organization becomes, the more its people need to meet in person.” (Handy, 1995; 46)*

Internal communication is usually confined to organizational members, whereas external communication is directed to users and other stakeholders.

Communication is not necessarily explicit; the services, the collections, the tools, the physical and digital environment that a library offers are all forms of implicit communication (Di Domenico, 2004).

A signpost in Italian studies of business communication is represented by the paradigm of organizational communication (Invernizzi, 2000), which overcomes the traditional distinction between internal and external communication.

Communicational interactions are classified according to their purposes and content:

**FIGURE 3: ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION**

TYPE OF COMMUNICATION	CONTENT	TOOLS
Functional	Operational information	Conversations, meetings, letters, handbooks
Strategic	Mission, vision	House organs, interviews with top management, email, brochures
Educational	In-service training	Classroom activities, training on the job
Creative	Innovative knowledge	Brainstorming, email, groupware

*Adapted from: Invernizzi, 2000*

This classification is consistent with the learning organization model and with the studies on empowerment in libraries.

Functional communication is needed at the operational level by the “*front lines of the organization*”, and it represents a “*competitive advantage*” (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1995, 142). This is what has been defined “*tangible information*”

(Dixon, 1998, 164).

At the strategic level, “*common understanding of goals*” (Bender, 1997, 21) is needed by all the staff. In Senge’s wording, communication is necessary to create a shared vision and a sense of ownership. This is what has been defined “*intangible information*” (Dixon, 1998, 164).

At the educational level, the staff are entitled to “*adequate emotional support and the necessary training to adjust to new work arrangements*” (Worrell, 1995, 356). The importance of individual and organizational learning, and of sharing information and knowledge, is unquestionable.

Creative communication seems to be the highest form of communication. It brings about innovation, and sets free the personal mastery of individuals or, leaving aside Senge’s terminology, it makes empowerment possible.

Summing up,

*“Strong organizational communication suggests quality, consistency, and quantity ... poor communication demotivates employees, stalls progress, and may result in library employees failing to achieve their goals.” (Christopher, 2003, 24)*

Assuming that “*knowledge itself is a power*” (Dixon, 1998, 161), “*the availability of information helps reduce hierarchical thinking*” (Christopher, 2003, 38).

Practically speaking, organizations have to communicate “*clear job descriptions, policies, procedures, and guidelines*” (Christopher, 2003, 24).

Such statements sometimes appear to be of no practical consequence, and usually arouse scepticism and annoyance, especially when applied to the Italian public sector.

Actually, Italian public administrations are revising their approach to communication, namely external communication. It seems ironic that this should be imposed upon public institutions by means of special rules and regulations. Yet, the need for proactive communication is strongly felt and will hopefully trigger a virtuous circle (Donolo, 1999, *passim*). Resistance to change is an inevitable consequence. Communication professionals are presently the sole gatekeepers of communicational activities, which are gradually becoming, however, transversal competencies (Rolando, 1999, *passim*). Implementing effective communication plans is a critical factor of growth, and needs accurate

scheduling, continuous monitoring, and synergic efforts (Rega, 2001, passim).

## **2.5 Deficiencies in the studies**

As seen above, there is plenty of literature on learning organizations, on empowerment, and on communication.

Still, the researcher feels that there are shady areas to investigate:

- empowerment - identified here as the core of the learning organization - has never been thoroughly explored in an Italian academic library system and least of all by applying a qualitative approach
- in Italy communication researchers have traditionally studied private companies; only recently have scholars turned to the public sector. Communication studies applied to Italian libraries are limited to a purely theoretical level, and mainly focus on external communication
- Italian libraries have eventually taken a user-centred stance. However, the correct emphasis on user needs paradoxically jeopardizes internal communication altogether. In other words, the communication needs of the people within the organization may be dramatically overlooked
- the interrelations between empowerment and communication need to be explored in context by analyzing information-rich cases in order to take into account the multidimensional and multifaceted nature of both concepts.

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## 3 THE RESEARCH DESIGN

### 3.1 *The research paradigm*

*“Differences in paradigm assumptions cannot be dismissed as mere “philosophical” differences; implicitly or explicitly, these positions have important consequences for the practical conduct of inquiry, as well as for the interpretation of findings and policy choices.” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, 112)*

This is a research in library and information studies<sup>2</sup> and is therefore classified as social research.

Social research can start from different assumptions about the “*form and nature of reality*” (ontological question), the “*nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known*” (epistemological question), and the way the researcher finds out what he wants to know - and believes can be known (methodological question) (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, 108).

The researcher needs to be fully aware of the implications of his/her own responses to the above ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues. If there is one “real” reality, the researcher has to take an objective “I am a camera” stance, start from a hypothesis and verify it by using mainly quantitative methods. This is the positivist paradigm.

At the other end of the continuum, the constructivist paradigm is based on the assumption that there are local and specific constructions of reality, that the investigator interacts with the respondents during his/her inquiry, and that “*knowledge accumulates only in a relative sense*”, hence the importance of case study reports (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, 114).

This research aims at “*get[ing] under the skin*” of the LS by exploring the “*complexities*” of “*informal reality*” “*in context*” (Gillham, 2000a, 11). There are no *a priori* assumptions or predetermined hypotheses because both empowerment and communication are context-bound concepts, which can only be explored in a given environment, as they are perceived by the target population.

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<sup>2</sup> Hence LIS.

*“The recognition that empowerment is an individualized and dynamic experience poses a critical challenge for empowerment researchers – the identification of research methods that capture this complexity.” (Foster-Fishman et al., 1998, 508)*

Reality can be known only through the meanings that people give to it and this implies that there are multiple, socially constructed realities to be explored holistically (Corbetta, 2003a, 39). This specially applies to multi-faceted and multi-dimensional concepts, whose richness and complexity calls for deep investigation. The starting points are “*sensitizing concept[s]*” (Patton, quoting Blumer, 1990, 216), which are defined both operationally and theoretically during the research process itself.

The literature shows that there are no universally established definitions of empowerment, as it is contextually embedded, and is influenced by possible previous experiences and by the personal histories of the actors. There is therefore both a social and an individual dimension to take into account, and a constructivist approach to inquiry is recommended.

Communication evokes likewise multiple meanings and multiple perspectives. The concept has been equalled to behaviour itself, as it is an attribute inherent in human beings, which cannot possibly not be. Here too, communicational interactions have to be studied in context, and they have both an individual and a social dimension. Communication within organizations takes multiple forms (formal and informal, verbal, non-verbal and written, implicit and explicit, to name but a few), and has manifold purposes (to inform, to train, to counsel, to coach, to share among others). There can be a communication plan or else sheer day-to-day improvisation. The only certainty is that communication is always there; organizations cannot not communicate, because they are made up of people, and people cannot not communicate.

Besides, the focus here is to explore the relationships between communication and empowerment, as they are perceived through the eyes of the people under study. This research is therefore person-centred and case-based, and it is a construction of the researcher and the research participants.

Flexibility is needed in order to let theory emerge during the collection of data; there has to be a continuous interaction between theory and research, and a “*continuous interplay between analysis and data collection*”, because theory has

to be “grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, 273).

The aim is to understand (Verstehen) the multiple viewpoints of the subjects under study without being too much influenced by preconceived notions (Corbetta, 2003a, 33).

The behaviours of participants are also analyzed, and they are “by definition historically, socially and culturally relative” (Schwandt, 1994, 130).

### 3.1.1 The approach to the research

*“Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter.” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2)*

The nature of the research questions determines the approach to be taken. This study aims at answering the following questions:

- How do the LS staff feel about empowerment?
- How do library directors feel about empowerment?
- How can communication affect empowerment practices?

In this case, the questions begin with “how”, and the study is exploratory; a qualitative approach is therefore required (Creswell, 2003, 30).

A quantitative approach would imply:

- measurable variables
- hard quantitative data
- presumption of naïve realism
- claims of generalization or replication
- neutral, objective stance of the researcher
- large, representative sample.

None of the above applies to this study, which is to all intents and purposes qualitative.

As already mentioned above, this inquiry aims at exploring multifaceted and multidimensional phenomena holistically and in context; it cannot therefore be “tightly prefigured”. Actually, the research questions have been slightly altered from the original questions stated in the research proposal. Data collection, interpretation, and analysis have been “iterative and simultaneous” processes. The researcher cannot (and does not want to) separate her “personal-self” from her “researcher-self” (Creswell, 2003, 181-182).

The research strategy and data collection tools chosen are consistent with the nature of this study, as it has been hitherto outlined.

### 3.1.2 The research strategy

Case studies are the method to be chosen when research questions begin with a “how”, such as the research questions in this study (Yin, 2003b, 3-7).

Choosing the research strategy which best suits the research questions, aims and objectives is a critical success factor.

It is worthwhile remembering that

*“Case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied.” (Stake, 1994, 236)*

The main unit of analysis here is the LS as a whole (Yin, 2003b, 42-43). This study is exploratory because it does not start from stated propositions (Yin, 2003b, 12; 22), and it is designed as an embedded, single case-study.

Case studies are recommended when

- contemporary events are investigated in a real-life context
- behaviours cannot possibly be manipulated by the researcher
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined (Yin, 2003b, 9-13).

This study is therefore based on:

- in-depth exploration
- a thick description
- a holistic view

of the phenomena.

The purpose of the researcher is to better understand the case, as this is predominantly an *“intrinsic case study”* (Stake, 1994, 237). The case itself is considered to be of interest, given the lack of similar studies in Italian literature.

By giving a rich picture of the case, the researcher hopes to provide the opportunity of transferring the findings to presumably similar contexts where appropriate.

*“With its own unique history, the case is a complex entity operating within a number of contexts...” (Stake, 1994, 239)*

### 3.1.3 The research process

In qualitative research, the level of formalization is relatively low and procedures are not standardized. The researcher must be careful not to close the line of inquiry, while giving vent to his/her creativity.

Keeping focused is a major issue; important details, however, may be overlooked because they do not fit in the original design of the research.

Qualitative researchers are themselves the primary research tools, provided they keep a reflective attitude throughout the whole process, and they justify every step taken and every choice made.

### 3.1.4 Literature review

The literature is useful to “*frame*” the issue that concerns the researcher (Creswell, 2003, 30-31). In this study, the researcher had first focused on the learning organization model applied to academic libraries, a management issue bordering on other disciplines, such as organizational psychology.

The potentially relevant databases were considered to be:

- general databases, such as Dissertation Abstracts
- subject databases, such as Library and Information Science Abstracts, Business Source Elite, Social Sciences Citation Index, ERIC, and Psychinfo (the topic being multidisciplinary)
- ESSPER, an Italian database of economic and social sciences
- E-LIS, an Open Archive of Library and Information Sciences
- several aggregators of e-journals, such as Science Direct and Emerald
- the directory of open access journals
- ZETOC
- the online catalogue of the Italian National Library Service
- the online catalogue of the Library of Congress
- the Internet to find updated material, such as working papers.

It was not easy to determine the scope of the literature review and to keep a sense of direction. It was necessary to delve into the theory first, and the researcher decided to take Senge’s *The fifth discipline* (1990) as a landmark.

After having contextualized the topic, i.e. having applied the laws, disciplines and archetypes of the learning organization theory to a library environment, the

next step was to find practical examples, case studies, and implementations. It turned out that they almost exclusively referred to the United States.

### **3.1.5 Research proposal**

The weakest – and least investigated – area seemed to be the potential conflict between leaders and subordinates in libraries on the way to becoming learning organizations.

The researcher had originally decided to investigate the concepts of leadership and of empowerment as perceived by leaders and subordinates, and to analyze the impact of in-service training and communication in this respect.

It seemed an ambitious plan, but it was considered altogether feasible. Actually, as frequently happens with novice researchers, the complexity of the themes involved turned out to be unmanageable given the time, experience and resource constraints.

The literature on leadership is immense, and it was impossible to relate styles of leadership and styles of followership without analyzing a much wider sample. It was apparent that the topic was too broad to be covered in the depth required by the approach chosen.

Having realized that leaders too had to cope with their own empowerment (the issue emerged during the interviews), empowerment was chosen as the determinant to investigate. A closer and more careful analysis of the literature showed that much of the learning organization revolved around this major concept, and Senge's later propositions were extremely clear in this respect (Senge, 1996).

It was a partial paradigm shift which made the research smoother and more reasonable.

The researcher had initially decided to consider the impact of both in-service training and communication on empowerment practices, because she had assumed that they both had equal importance. The focus groups' preliminary results highlighted the comparative weight of communication; training was considered to be relevant only inasmuch as it compensated for lack of communication. The research was then further narrowed down to what then seemed to be both a manageable and a stimulating topic, under the spur of the participants themselves.

### 3.1.6 Sampling procedures

In qualitative inquiries, the researcher defines the units of analysis and the boundaries of the case, and usually studies in-depth comparatively small samples (Patton, 1990, 184).

The researcher therefore chooses the cases that facilitate the comprehension of the phenomenon, according to the theoretical importance that concepts take on as the research process develops. The hypothetical aspiration is to achieve *“theoretical saturation”*, when *“no new properties and dimensions emerge from the data”* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, 158).

Unlike quantitative studies,

*“there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry.” (Patton, 1990, 184)*

A small number of participants could yield valuable information as the researcher adopted purposeful sampling and chose *“information-rich cases”*, which were *“worthy of in-depth study”* (Patton, 1990, 181), because the researcher could learn a great deal from them.

The strategy adopted was *“intensity sampling”*, i.e. selecting *“information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely”* (Patton, 1990, 169-171), while excluding extreme or unusual cases.

Eight people from the LS staff were selected for the focus groups, according to the researcher's prior information and knowledge. The criterion was the presumed sensitivity to the topic and relevant intense personal experiences.

In fact, all the participants were truly motivated and concerned, and had direct personal experiences and strong feelings about the phenomena relevant to the research. This determined a comparative homogeneity of the sample, an essential prerequisite for focus group interviews (Patton, 1990, 173).

The focus groups participants were accordingly rather young (30-45), motivated and qualified people, whose backgrounds, tenure and education were however diverse. They had all been working in different subunits of the LS for a period ranging from one and a half to fourteen years. Still, their positions in the organization were equivalent, as they all belonged to the same category, even though their functions could differ.

All the participants were individually contacted by telephone and were

subsequently given a consensus form with a brief description of the research. Thanks to this direct approach, initial curiosity was immediately satisfied, and no one showed mistrust or reluctance to cooperate. The meetings were arranged taking into account everybody's needs and engagements. The attention and respect shown to the informants was more than adequately reciprocated through their active and dynamic participation.

Four library directors were selected for the interviews among those who had a recognized status. As already mentioned in the introduction, the LS was undergoing major restructuring and the regulation was still pending. This was the reason why the status some directors had not been formalized yet.

The interviewees were three women and a man, all in their forties, and their experience as library directors ranged from two to ten years. The libraries they managed were diverse and catered for different subject fields. They already knew about the researcher's inquiry as she had been introduced in the LS steering committee.

One library director was excluded from the sample because he/she was the former supervisor of the researcher, and the risk of bias and excessive involvement was considered to be too high. Other directors were not reachable during the time period set for collecting the data. Other cases were considered extreme, and therefore in contrast with the sampling strategy adopted.

The LS coordinator was the natural and logical key informant to choose, as she knew both the big picture and the individual positions of the LS staff and directors.

### **3.1.7 Data collection tools**

Multiple sources of evidence were used in order to develop "*converging lines of inquiry*" and "*triangulation*" of data (Yin, 2003b, 98).

The researcher tried to make the most of her own "*enculturation*" (Spradley, 1979, 47), i.e. of already knowing the culture of the organization, and of her own position in the organization itself.

A pilot interview was held within the library deemed to be the most convenient to "*develop relevant lines of questions*" (Yin, 2003b, 79). The interview script

was not ready yet and the conversation flowed freely starting from the sensitizing concepts. The outcomes were satisfactory, and the researcher thought it was a pity to lose the data, so the interview was “resumed” and completed following the script.

Locating informants, gaining access and trust, and establishing rapport (Fontana & Frey, 1994, 366-367), which are usually troublesome for novice researchers (Spradley, 1979, 46), went rather straightforwardly in this case.

Interviewing is a powerful tool for exploratory studies, and unstructured interviewing is ideal when the goal is to understand (Fontana & Frey, 1994, 367). Face-to-face semistructured in-depth qualitative interviews were considered the most suitable and effective tool to obtain information from library directors.

*“We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe... We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions.”  
(Patton, 1990, 278)*

The researcher decided to interview the library directors individually in order to avoid potential conflicts and competitiveness. She believed that the interviewees would feel more relaxed and possibly be more sincere in a cosy one-to-one context. Assembling a few of them would have reproduced the LS steering committee meetings climate and would have produced inevitable confrontations.

The researcher considered it necessary to have an interview schedule, lest important questions be overlooked through distraction or inexperience. It was not followed step by step, as the researcher felt it too unnatural to ask a list of prescribed questions. She checked however that the interviewees provided all the answers needed, which happened naturally and effortlessly. The interviewees were therefore allowed a high level of ownership and adequate time (and a fair amount of rambling on). They went into the phenomena relevant to the inquiry with eagerness and involvement, showing their concern and motivation.

The interviews took place in their offices during the Christmas holidays, so that the atmosphere was more relaxed and propitious, and lasted from one to two

hours.

Two mini focus groups (four people each) were held with the LS staff. The use of a limited number of participants was considered apt to reach the required depth of understanding, because it allowed everyone to express his/her opinions at length. Focus groups were considered to be valuable for exploratory purposes and appropriate for the complexity of the topics tackled. They are flexible tools, as they facilitate an informal and friendly climate (Zammuner, 2003, 24; 55; 59). It was also possible to observe the dynamics of the group and to take advantage of the information richness of non-verbal communication. A comfortable and convenient room, already familiar to the participants, was found in both cases, so that the groups were neither interrupted nor disturbed. Homemade refreshment was provided, and this contributed to make the start smoother and to create a relaxed climate.

Here too there was a script, but the researcher decided to act as a facilitator and to allow for loose and unstructured exchanges of opinions, for the sake of spontaneity; it would have been a pity to stop the natural flow of conversation. Actually the willingness and need to talk, to communicate, to gather and share opinions and to reflect together emerged clearly, and the focus group turned out to be the most effective data collection tool in this instance.

The researcher also decided to study the dynamics of the LS steering committee, that is the interactions among the library directors and the LS coordinator, through overt direct and unobtrusive onlooker observation of the meetings. It is always valuable to have an opportunity to see what people do, as opposed to what they say.

The researcher had no doubts about choosing the observational approach, as her position did not allow her to participate. It was not too hard to be comparatively inconspicuous, as the researcher was familiar with all the participants, and after the first five minutes of curiosity no one seemed to pay much attention to her, as outsiders were sometimes allowed to join the meetings.

The researcher originally intended to gather further evidence on strategic communication within the LS through documentary analysis. This tool would

have been totally independent of the researcher, who cannot in this instance manipulate the data collected, because it is not the outcome of the interaction between the observer and the observed (Corbetta, 2003b, 115-116). Alas, as explained in 4.4, documentary analysis was not considered applicable to this context, as institutional documents were not as public as they should have been (Corbetta, 2003b, 117) or were simply missing.

Totally informal and unstructured face-to-face talks with the LS coordinator supplemented and shed light especially upon the outcomes of the observations and attempts at documentary analysis. The researcher limited herself to broadening the usual discussions to cover the phenomena relevant to the inquiry, as these brainstorming and briefing activities were habitual practice for both.

All interviews and focus group were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The conversations with the coordinator were summarized in the field notes. The observations were audio taped and then summarized in the field notes.

**FIGURE 4: SYNOPSIS OF RESEARCH AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND TOOLS**

<b>AIM</b>	To evaluate whether and to what extent the LS staff were ready to be empowered
<b>OBJECTIVES</b>	To investigate the meanings that the LS staff attributed to such words as autonomy, empowerment, and delegation To explore the effective determinants for autonomy, empowerment, and delegation according to the library staff To probe the LS staff's commitment and motivation in this respect
<b>TOOLS</b>	2 mini focus groups (4 participants each) with a purposive sample of staff (intensity sampling, information-rich cases) selected from different libraries Informal conversational interviews with the key informant (LS coordinator)

<b>AIMS</b>	To evaluate whether and to what extent the library directors felt empowered To evaluate whether and to what extent the library directors were ready to empower their staff
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<b>OBJECTIVES</b>	<p>To investigate the meanings that the library directors attributed to such words as autonomy, empowerment, and delegation</p> <p>To explore the effective determinants for autonomy, empowerment, and delegation according to the library directors</p> <p>To assess the library directors' commitment and motivation in this respect</p>
<b>TOOLS</b>	<p>4 face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of library directors (intensity sampling, information-rich cases) selected from different libraries</p> <p>Observations of the LS steering committee meetings</p> <p>Informal conversational interviews with the key informant (LS coordinator)</p>

<b>AIMS</b>	<p>To explore the relationships between communication on the one hand and empowerment on the other hand</p> <p>To provide evidence for better communication in this respect</p>
<b>OBJECTIVES</b>	<p>To investigate the kind of communication that best served the purposes of empowerment according to the LS staff</p> <p>To investigate the kind of communication that best served the purposes of empowerment according to the library directors</p>
<b>TOOLS</b>	<p>Mini focus groups with a purposive sample of staff (intensity sampling, information-rich cases) selected from different libraries</p> <p>Face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of library directors (intensity sampling, information-rich cases) selected from different libraries</p> <p>Observation of the LS steering committee meetings</p> <p>Informal conversational interviews with the key informant (LS coordinator)</p>

### 3.1.8 Data analysis and interpretation

What the researcher had to do at this stage was to identify, describe, interpret, read, analyze, reconstruct and summarize emerging themes (Corbetta, 2003a, 83).

The first step was to provide a *“thick description”* (Patton, quoting Geertz, 1990, 375), which implied not only rigour and meticulousness, but also looking under the surface into the subtlest shades of significance. This is feasible only if the field notes and transcriptions are complete and accurate enough.

The interpretation followed the description. Two strategies were possible: *“case analysis means writing a case study for each person interviewed or each unit studied”*, while *“cross-case analysis means grouping together answers from different people to common questions”* (Patton, 1990, 376). Here the researcher analyzed the data sets according to the tool used, i.e.:

- ✓ focus groups
- ✓ interviews
- ✓ observations.

Emerging patterns were disclosed by the cross-analysis of all the data sets. Building up a consistent and suitable classificatory system involved at the same time a great deal of creativity and of thoroughness, as well as intellectual rigour. It was difficult to find the right balance between description and interpretation. Quotations were kept whenever they were considered to be effective and illuminating for the purpose of the inquiry.

### **3.1.9 Strategies for validating findings**

*“Validity is not a single, fixed or universal concept, but rather a contingent construct, inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of particular research methodologies and projects.”  
(Winter, 2000)*

Validity is correlated to appropriate sampling procedures, and grounding findings in the data.

*“The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher rather than with sample size.” (Patton, 1990, 185)*

Still, choosing a limited sampling, albeit information-rich, *“may lead to distortion in the findings”* (Patton, 1990, 181). Validity is then attained through a heuristic tool such as triangulation. The researcher consequently used multiple data sources and multiple data collection tools, thus triangulating methods and people.

Evidence is primary and the reconstruction of the researcher must prove to be faithful to the views expressed by the interviewees. A *“prolonged engagement”* is usually needed in order to learn the culture of the participants, test for misinformation and build trust (Oka & Shaw, quoting Guba & Lincoln, 2000). In this case the researcher was advantaged, because she was already well acquainted with the environment and with the people involved.

The researcher availed herself of peer debriefing, in order to test the working

hypotheses and emerging designs with an informed outsider (Huberman & Miles, 1994, 439).

Cases were contextually embedded and the researcher endeavoured to provide a rich picture of the context (Corbetta, 2003b, 115). Similarity judgments may be based on contextual applicability. It is not the responsibility of the researcher, however, to account for possible generalizations.

The research design was flexible and the research findings were produced by constantly changing interactions between researchers and participants.

*“Far from being threats to dependability, such changes and shifts are hallmarks of a maturing – and successful – inquiry. But such changes and shifts need to be both tracked and trackable (publicly inspectable).” (Oka & Shaw, quoting Guba & Lincoln, 2000)*

The researcher documented all the operational steps of the research (Yin, 2003b, 37-39). Confirmability builds on audit trails, which include recorded materials, field notes, transcripts, a research diary, a reflexive journal, and so on. The researcher was accurate in record keeping, but was perfectly aware that an auditor’s analysis is such a complex and expensive business that it is restricted to *“high-stakes studies”* (Huberman & Miles, 1994, 440) and was therefore out of the question in this case.

### **3.2 The researcher**

The researcher had been working at the University of Trieste for almost eighteen years, and she had been experiencing deep change in workplace requirements and ethics in a comparatively short time span. She was aware of the impact of such profound transformations on the daily activities and on the professional role of librarians.

Gaining access and trust was easy, as the researcher could be classified among *“internal networkers”*, who *“are able to move around the organization freely”* and *“are not a particular threat to anyone”* because they have *“little or no positional authority”* (Senge, 1996). This helped a lot in obtaining collaboration and respect, following the *“reciprocity model”* (Patton, 1990, 253).

The researcher was highly motivated because she was an *“experiential expert”* herself, and this gave a heuristic touch to the research. She actually found out

during the focus groups to what extent she empathized with the interviewees, having felt disempowered for most of her career. She had only recently been appointed responsible for in-service training and user education and had consequently managed to unlock her potential.

The researcher aimed at *“empathic neutrality”*, an apparently impracticable oxymoron, which meant that she had *“no theory to prove, and no predetermined results to support”* (Patton, 1990, 54). A certain degree of subjectivity, however, was undeniable, as

*“The researcher filters the data through a personal lens.” (Creswell, 2003, 182)*

In fact, in qualitative inquiry, the researcher is part of the research and a research instrument both for gathering and interpreting data. The findings are the result of his/her interaction with the phenomenon studied.

In this case, the researcher was part of the context studied, and this led to a potential weakness (researcher’s bias), that was hopefully turned into a strength (in-depth understanding).

### **3.2.1 Limitations of the research**

This research focused on:

- ✓ a major determinant for learning organizations (empowerment, roughly equated to personal mastery)
- ✓ a major determinant for participative organizations broadly speaking (communication)

by analyzing how the LS staff and library directors perceived

- ✓ empowerment (plus its related concepts: autonomy and delegation)
- ✓ the impact of communication on empowerment.

It goes without saying that the learning organization is a complex concept that implies many other characteristics, and an exhaustive study would not be practicable.

The researcher however deliberately decided to limit the research not only because of the constraints explained in 3.1.5, but also assuming that *“some characteristics”* were *“more important than others for the organisation to succeed”*, as established in previous studies (Tan Siew Chye & Higgins, 2002, 177).

The literature showed that empowerment was as a fundamental factor; librarians stressed the value of communication. The researcher decided to look into the connections between the two.

### **3.2.2 Ethical issues**

The researcher was careful in making the purpose of the research explicit to all participants.

Informed consent was gained from all the people involved, and the participants eagerly and willingly agreed to be interviewed or observed.

The researcher guaranteed that the information disclosed during the research would be reported exactly, but the privacy of participants would be secured, thus assuring confidentiality and not mere anonymity.

It is fundamental to remember that

*“Informants are human beings with problems, concerns, and interests.” (Spradley, 1979, 34)*

Trust and respect must be mutual, and the researcher must reciprocate by safeguarding the *“rights, interests, and sensitivities”* of the participants (Spradley, 1979, 36).

The researcher felt this obligation even more strongly, as the informants were also colleagues, some of them long standing, and she felt the responsibilities of her double role, as a researcher and as a workmate. She consequently made sure that no potential harm whatsoever could ensue to the participants.

The possible repercussions of the study on the LS were anticipated. Given the coordinator’s strong support and encouragement, the researcher believes that this inquiry may result in a collective meditation on the LS and hopefully produce reflective thinking and stir up a debate.

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## 4 FINDINGS

### 4.1 Focus groups

#### 4.1.1. Aims

The focus groups were intended to

- ✓ investigate the meanings that the LS staff attributed to such words as autonomy, empowerment, and delegation
- ✓ explore the effective determinants for autonomy, empowerment, and delegation according to the library staff
- ✓ probe the LS staff's commitment and motivation in this respect
- ✓ investigate the kind of communication that best served the purposes of empowerment according to the LS staff.

#### 4.1.2. Foreword

The conversation flow was lively and “hot”, and the researcher merely hinted at the issues to tackle. The interaction among participants was effective, as everyone equally contributed and paid attention to the others. Several times the informers even provided answers to questions that had not been asked yet. This proved the effectiveness of the questioning route (see appendix, II).

The first focus group lasted one hour, the second one hour and a half.

#### 4.1.3. Presentation pattern

Below, the findings of the focus groups were classified and related to the questioning route according to the following presentation pattern:

**FIGURE 5: PRESENTATION PATTERN**

Question number(s) within the questioning route	cf. appendix, II
Gist of the outcome of the questions in the researcher's wording	<b><i>in bold italic</i></b>
Overall comments of the researcher on the informants' responses	plain text
Key factors identified by the researcher as the expansion of the gist	marked by an asterisk (*)
Excerpts from the informants' speech that exemplify the key factors	<i>“in italic and inverted commas”</i>

#### 4.1.4. Analysis

##### ◆ QUESTION #1

###### ***Different transitions to librarianship***

Four participants were “accidental librarians”, as they had not planned to work in a library and had diverse educational curricula.

Two had actually graduated in Cultural Heritage, the Italian degree closest to LIS. One of them said it had been “*a childish whim. As a child, I played at being a librarian with my brother*”. The other could not date when she had “*heard the call*”.

The remaining two had taken a Humanities degree and had followed a two-year course in librarianship (as there was no specific LIS degree at the time).

The “accidental” librarians however had preferred working in a library to other job opportunities (bank, bookseller, business, accounting department).

##### ◆ QUESTIONS #2 AND #6

###### ***The degree of autonomy perceived was contextualized through personal experiences***

It is worthwhile bearing in mind that “autonomy” is the closest Italian equivalent to the organic definition of empowerment, a crucial point for the research. This accounts for the abundance of comments, definitions and suggestions on this specific topic. All participants considered themselves as autonomous, on a self-established scale ranging from enough to intermittently to totally.

The predicament of abrupt autonomy imposed upon librarians by external circumstances was however described as productive in its medium-term outcome.

The researcher identified the following key factors:

##### \* **The subjective/relative dimension of autonomy**

*“I think I’m autonomous enough, I say “enough” not because it’s a matter of hierarchy, but because it’s a matter of character.”*

*“I don’t know, because it [i.e. autonomy] doesn’t mean anything, in the sense that one may feel autonomous in doing petty things ... Sometimes I feel autonomous, sometimes I feel like a dogsbody... it’s more of a perception... If I look back and I look ahead, I feel averagely autonomous.”*

*“... I think the only truly autonomous person in the library is the director. And not even then, because he/she depends on the*

*interaction with those who are beneath – so to speak. This is why I say the definition of autonomy varies...*

\* **The importance of having specific areas of competence**

*“... I’m rather autonomous as far as my main activity is concerned, i.e. cataloguing... there’s an area which has always been completely mine.”*

*“I’m totally autonomous, meaning that my main activity is cataloguing, I’m the only one doing that, i.e. there is no one that knows my job better than I do in my library.”*

*“There would be no one able to help me, therefore I must be autonomous because I’m the only one capable of doing certain things, and I would not even know who to turn to.”*

\* **The need for coaching, tutoring, counselling, and exchanging opinions**

*“Even when you are able to do your job, it’s alright as long as there is someone ready to counsel you, to support you etc. ...”*

*“Sometimes you feel the desire, the need to have a point of reference, not because you are not able to do the things you have to, but in order to have a shoulder to lean on, a support...”*

*“There must be a balance between the things to do and the human variables.”*

\* **Productiveness of autonomy**

*“It’s been a further spur, surely a moment of growth..., a productive moment... I’ve been acquiring more and more confidence...”*

*“It’s been painful, true, but it has enabled me to learn a lot.”*

◆ **QUESTIONS #3 AND #5**

***Empowerment - being a loan word - did not convey a precise meaning to the participants***

Before starting to collect the data, the researcher believed that empowerment would be a comparatively well-known expression to qualified and cultured Italians, but she was biased by her own knowledge of English.

Librarians were not familiar with the term and the researcher did not want to impose any prescriptive definition upon them; she therefore limited herself to unobtrusive prompting, lest the participants could feel that their knowledge of English was being tested and assessed.

Librarians actually made educated guesses based upon contextualization and

starting from the root of the word (“power”).

The researcher had taken into account the possible ignorance of the term, albeit she had underestimated it. She had therefore included two questions on autonomy and one on delegation in the questioning route.

Still librarians managed to identify two possible approaches to empowerment, which corresponded to the organic and mechanistic definition of empowerment. On the whole, organic empowerment was considered positively, while mechanistic empowerment aroused suspicion and mistrust.

The participants approximately equated the former to autonomy and the latter to delegation. This accounted for the comparative scarcity of comments on empowerment itself and on its determinant factors, and for the shift of the conversation towards autonomy and delegation.

The researcher accordingly believes that the terminological dilemma did neither cause loss of information nor did it jeopardize the effectiveness of the research in reaching its aims and objectives.

The researcher identified the meanings attributed by the participants as follows.

**\* Misty denotation, but positive overall connotation of empowerment**

*“I have a vague idea... to “potentiate your potential”, what a terrible definition! ... finding, realizing, making my bosses realize, or even better if they realized it by themselves, which is the sphere of the activities where I can do my best and be left alone... a sort of virtuous circle...”*

*“There’s motivation in it... if you take into consideration... the motivations, sensitivity, inclinations, and degrees of satisfaction of people... then people are more self-satisfied, they are not only a cog in a machine... maybe they work double, but they are surely satisfied...”*

*“... when the power, well the power to decide or the autonomy of an individual within an organization is increased.”*

*“...cohesion among different individuals aimed at reaching predetermined objectives...”*

*“...I am not sure about the English; however, the idea of “potentiating” comes to my mind...”*

**\* Negative connotation of mechanistic empowerment**

*“I feel it as being totally negative, some terms, some things, when they come top down they make me shiver...to be the object of an empowerment plan [bursts of laughter] ... It makes me think I am*

*being backed into a corner, they are making me do something I don't like ..."*

*"Concealed exploitation..."*

#### ◆ **QUESTIONS #4 AND #6**

##### ***The inevitable intricacies of delegation***

All the participants underlined the importance of considering not only the job to do and the objectives to accomplish but also the people involved and their needs. This is why delegation should not be merely considered as imposing a task upon subordinates, but as offering them an opportunity to show their capacities. By correctly entrusting someone with more responsibilities, he/she can derive more satisfaction and more motivation in doing his/her job. Needless to say, not everyone can or wants to accept delegation.

It was generally agreed that unfortunately the LS had no adequate organizational culture; leaders were not used to self-analysis and to optimizing their staff and sometimes kept delaying solutions and decisions. A recurring term was "valorizzare", which has no equivalent in English. The idea is both to appreciate the worth of people and to enable them to prove what they are worth.

On the whole, no one could think of an example of correct delegation, but this was regarded as almost inevitable, given the multiple determinants entailed. It was noted that the more the components failed the less the whole thing could work, and it could actually end up with a boomerang effect.

Leaders were perceived to lack the required trust, motivation, clarity, credibility, sensitivity, vision, and ability to plan in the medium to long term.

The following were considered to be the main pitfalls of delegation.

##### \* **Excess of control or conversely total lack of control**

*"Everything I do is monitored and evaluated by my boss; he/she cannot do without it."*

*"I feel I have a good deal of autonomy... to tell the truth, I would rather have had less autonomy."*

##### \* **Delegation as abdication of responsibility**

*"When you realize that your boss delegates what he/she is not able to manage, he/she loses credibility and moreover he/she has no control..."*

*“Delegation should be accompanied, it often boils down to “now you do that”... I think on the contrary it should be considered... tested ... a complex thing after all because it needs someone who orchestrates the whole thing...”*

**\* Ambiguity of delegation**

*“... when the person who decides has already got an idea in his/her mind and I am only told part of it, then maybe I waste my time doing a thing that does not correspond to this idea and then ... it has to be done all over again... so you end up by asking all the time “Is it alright? Is it alright?””*

*“To have a positive effect, delegation must be awfully clear, and well-known to everyone...”*

**\* Fear of losing prestige and control**

*“According to the old mentality, if [bosses] delegate the things they’re good at... they feel they’re losing power... they feel diminished...”*

*“A key factor [is]... perhaps it’s naive, a happy boss... they are the first to feel ... overloaded with unpleasant things to do ... therefore they don’t give up the most interesting ... things ...”*

**\* The importance of recognition and rewards**

*“Now and then, when he/she does something little ... just telling him/her he/she’s been good ... or showing some recognition... not necessarily economic or formal rewards...”*

*“[My boss] has a positive attitude; he /she tells you “good!” when you do something... it’s great for me.”*

**◆ QUESTION #7**

***Relevance and significance of these issues for the LS staff and for the LS***

The first part of this question seemed redundant, given the passion and heat with which all the librarians took part in the conversation and contributed to the discussion. This was implied in the sampling technique chosen; the participants were supposed to be experiential experts, and qualified and motivated people. Had they shown a lack of concern, the sampling would have proved ineffective. The second part of the question was less obvious and more complex. It was apparently focused on the organization itself, but it implied the sense of belonging and of ownership of its people. The participants evidently enjoyed the focus groups as an opportunity to talk and listen to their peers.

They had already introduced the topic of organizational culture, and longed for a shift from a goal-oriented to a people-centred organization. Communication

emerged at this stage as a necessary prerequisite for this cultural realignment.

\* **Deep need for discussing and sharing**

*“There is less and less time devoted to mutual exchanges among peers... there’s no way of going into things.”*

*“This thing we are doing here now, I like it enormously.”*

*“...maybe it’s cynical, but ... [having the opportunity to talk and be listened to] is like trying a joint, then you feel like trying it again.”*

*“I prefer to be compared to other people...”*

◆ **QUESTION #8**

***The power of communication***

This was a double question, as the researcher had intended to investigate how librarians perceived both in-service training and communication in their connection to empowerment.

Librarians immediately thought of in-house training, specifically the refreshment courses that had recently been held within the LS by LS experts of various topics. They believed that internal communication had been lacking, and that this kind of training compensated for the information gaps and created cohesion.

Everybody considered external training absolutely fundamental in providing stimuli as well as opportunities to be compared to different contexts. “Non-accidental” librarians especially considered it as a natural extension of their former studies. However, no one deemed it relevant to empowerment, let alone having an impact on empowerment practices.

According to the librarians, the only training significant to the inquiry was a combination of training and communication - akin to educational and functional communication. It consisted accordingly in sharing opinions, information and skills, thus promoting cohesion and empowerment.

It was clear that communication was the determinant to explore; everyone considered it to be essential as well as dramatically overlooked in the LS.

The researcher had intended to investigate the management of information within the LS without focusing on the interpersonal aspects of communication. Another paradigm shift occurred as librarians prioritized the people and

interpersonal communication. The latter was considered fundamental in preventing conflicts, making people feel involved, and increasing awareness.

\* **In-service training and communication**

*“Good communication probably makes the need for training less pressing.”*

*“In-house training held by the staff produces cohesion among colleagues more than communication classes.”*

*“In-house training is a mixture of training and communication... it is closer to communication than to training... to call meetings where one says “I’ve done this” and “you’re doing that”, and “how do you do this...””*

\* **Communication as a prerequisite for autonomy, motivation, delegation, and empowerment**

*“... Communication would greatly contribute to motivating people... If people keep working without knowing why, what is the objective... and what will happen tomorrow and maybe the boss knows... and doesn’t tell them... No one can possibly become autonomous and motivated without communication.”*

*“There must be as much communication as possible between the person who delegates, the person who accepts delegation and all the others.”*

*“Communication is fundamental for empowerment; it’s essential.”*

\* **The pitfalls of communication**

*“In Italy we often get lost in never-ending discussions...if too many people are involved...”*

*“With the double passage from ... [the coordinator] to the directors ... then to the others [i.e. the staff], well, we’ve seen that the original information changes when it comes top down or even worse there is no information at all.”*

*“I often get to know things from other sources...”*

*“Fixed ideas on the interpretation of reality have a great impact on communication... Paying attention to the people and to communicational aspects would be [strategic]... because many conflicts stem from these things...”*

*“My boss tells me how he/she perceives some conversations with the coordinator as streaked with a lack of trust... I told him/her that I feel exactly the same with him/her and he/she was stunned...”*

## ◆ QUESTION #9

### **Summing up**

At the end of the focus groups everyone was individually asked to list the keywords which could best summarize the gist of the meeting.

There were eight people involved. One of them did not feel like doing this task; there were therefore seven responses.

The three top concepts are in the table below; they were the ones mentioned by six to five people out of seven.

**FIGURE 6: STAFF'S KEYWORDS**

Communication	6
"Real" delegation	5
Team-working, social interactions, organizational climate	5

As expected, communication was the undisputable first hit.

Delegation was picked up on, but librarians eagerly emphasized its noblest (and most infrequent) sense.

The next entry was a remarkable one – given that it was not included in the questioning route. "Team-working, social interactions, organizational climate" all related to the yearning for a people-centred organization, the key note of both focus groups.

### \* **The human factor**

*"We take ourselves too seriously..."*

*"We should all work at all levels in harmony..."*

*"The LS has been made, we must make the LS people..."*

## **4.2. Interviews**

### **4.2.1 Aims**

The interviews were meant to

- ✓ investigate the meanings that the library directors attributed to such words as autonomy, empowerment, and delegation
- ✓ explore the effective determinants for autonomy, empowerment, and delegation according to the library directors
- ✓ assess the library directors' commitment and motivation in this

respect

- ✓ investigate the kind of communication that best served the purposes of empowerment according to the library directors.

#### **4.2.2. Foreword**

The interviews turned out to be even less structured than foreseen. This looseness, which reflected the quirky style of spontaneous oral communication, made subsequent analysis more complex. In fact, library directors were allowed to indulge themselves in the issues which were closest to their hearts, and did not answer single questions thoroughly.

The interview script echoed the focus group questioning route except for a few adjustments.

Not knowing exactly what the questions were about, there was a little initial uneasiness, which was however soon overcome. In fact all the interviewees gave vent to their feelings and opinions and described their own relevant experiences at length with no need for further urging or prompting.

This proved the effectiveness of the interview script (see appendix, III). The interviews lasted one to two hours.

#### **4.2.3. Presentation pattern**

The findings of the interviews were arranged in accordance with the presentation pattern of the focus groups (see 4.1.3). The researcher preferred however to collect apparently heterogeneous questions together because the issues tackled overlapped owing to the unstructured way in which the interviews had been conducted.

#### **4.2.4. Analysis**

##### **◆ QUESTION #1**

##### ***Different transitions from followership to leadership***

The directors selected were a varied bunch. Their educational backgrounds were diverse, ranging from Humanities degrees to a two-year course in librarianship to a master in library management to a high school diploma.

They were invited to describe how they had become directors.

Only one had formally taken the place of a former director who had retired after having “sat next to” him/her for a certain period.

One had been asked to replace another director temporarily, and then had stepped in permanently owing to an unforeseen chain of events.

Another one considered his/her appointment to be almost “*fortuitous... it came out of the blue*”.

Another had embarked on what he/she defined “*an adventure*” against the opinion of fellow librarians.

This is how they perceived the initial phases of their career as directors.

\* **The need for coaching, tutoring, counselling, and exchanging opinions**

*“... It was important for me to see that my supervisor was personally, deeply involved in the job... I admired [him/her] for [his/her] Anglo-Saxon style... rolling up his/her sleeves ... [he/she] was the first to do things, [he/she] didn't just tell others to do things...”*

*“I was alone but free! The coordinator gave me a hand, coached me, encouraged me when I felt totally disheartened...”*

*“I was rather naive, I hadn't realized ...it was something rather new for the LS... the coordinator was there backing me up and helping me in the earliest stages....”*

*“... It was really awfully difficult; I racked my brains for months on end... [I had] no one [to turn to], well I asked the other library directors for advice...”*

◆ **QUESTIONS #2 AND #4**

***The directors' propensity to delegate was contextualized through personal experiences***

All the people interviewed introduced the concept of delegation when asked to describe their working activities as directors. The importance of delegating was thus immediately acknowledged and delegation itself was unanimously perceived as positive. However, different styles and interpretations emerged, namely the “sitting next to Nellie” approach versus a more “detached” approach. Clear and agreed rules were usually deemed essential, but for an exception.

All the interviewees remarked that not everyone could accept delegation; some people were objectively difficult, others could not take on the responsibilities involved.

They were aware, to varying degrees, that it was necessary to find the middle ground between the objectives to be reached and the needs of the people. The human factor was generally acknowledged, albeit in different ways, by all the

interviewees.

The supposedly critical, sceptical or cynical views of other directors on delegation were also reported.

\* **Multiple approaches to delegation**

*"It is not enough when your supervisor tells you "now you have to do that"; he/she must give you the tools to solve that problem. If, having gone into an issue... you are able to master it, because you know it, and you can give a personal touch to it, improve it, then it's perfect ..."*

*"I have encouraged him/her, I was sitting by his/her side, when he/she made mistakes and he/she always felt them to be fatal, I made him/her feel they could be solved and now he/she has learnt how to solve them by himself/herself."*

*"I believe everyone likes to be responsible for something after all...there's satisfaction... there must be a framework though... which has to be negotiated and shared... [the limits are set] by the ability of the person who accepts delegation..."*

*"[I am] a boss who has exploited the professional skills of his/her colleagues... operational work can be delegated... I am rather sceptical about precise rules... I don't want to go into details... [but] I take all responsibilities for possible mistakes and problems."*

\* **Reconciling the objectives with the people**

*"First of all they're not subordinates to me, but co-workers ... people who help and contribute to make things work... I don't think there is first class and second class work, everyone does important things..."*

*"When [a subordinate] realizes that a nasty job is useful, it will still be nasty to him/her all the same, but at least it's [seen as being] useful!"*

*"The way out is a combination of tasks, inclinations, and preferences..."*

*"I'm interested in the objective to be reached...obviously with no collateral damage... [I keep] the political control on the achievement of the objective."*

\* **The human factor**

*"I cannot deny giving help to... [those] who ask it... I give up the things I've got to do ... people come up to me all the time to ask me something and what if I started slamming the door in their faces?"*

*"I feel quite lucky at times, because they are cooperative people, they're rather motivated... [However] I feel I'm always at everybody's beck and call and there is no adequate reciprocation...on the other*

*hand I believe it's unavoidably linked to ... me being in charge of the library..."*

*"I once told him/her don't cheat me, please, I promise I won't cheat you ... mistrust is terrible..."*

*"The results can be seen... they're due to the collaboration of colleagues... they've been wonderful..."*

**\* The prerequisites for delegation**

*"When a person does something you have to acknowledge recognition..."*

*"I've been lucky because if there had been someone else who didn't share the project... [however] he/she doesn't have to take on responsibilities which are far above him/her..."*

*"It depends on the professionalism of people, some can reach objectives by themselves; however there are people who have to be followed."*

**\* Reporting other views and practices on delegation**

*"Directors at times dump the jobs they don't like on the staff and keep the best for themselves, so they frustrate the staff... There are many directors who don't delegate... when you say you have too much to do, it doesn't depend only on the people you have ... it also depends on whether you trust those people..."*

*"I've been criticized by my colleagues... [because] I delegated too much, instead I'm proud of this, it's one of the objectives to reach... Delegating as much as possible, obviously to the most suitable people ..."*

**◆ QUESTIONS #3, #5 AND #6**

***A director should be an empowered subordinate empowering his/her staff***

There was no terminological dilemma here, as the interviewees were familiar with the word empowerment. Still, they gave no definition but exemplified their stance through examples.

The questions were meant to probe both how the directors felt empowered and how they empowered their staff, both in the organic and in the mechanistic interpretation.

It was immediately clear that their previous experiences as subordinates, as well as their individual temperaments, influenced their perception of empowerment and the way they empowered their staff, even though they all considered empowerment favourably.

Overall, an organic approach to empowerment seemed to be preferred, within the limits set by directors. The distinction between strategic and operational activities was underlined, but the boundaries were not so clear. It was apparent that there were different degrees of sensitivity to the suggestions and requests of the staff, which were somehow consistent with the styles of delegation.

It was also noted that directors too had to carry out a great deal of operational work, and one director especially resented this.

Possible sources of disempowerment, namely the difficult rapport with the faculties and departments, were also related. It turned out that academics did not share the concern of library directors over the destiny of libraries, but were more interested in keeping their own prerogatives, taking advantage of their unquestionable higher status.

The experiences of library directors were summarized as follows.

\* **The empowerment of directors was contextualized through their personal experiences**

*"... When I put forward certain things ... I thought ... [they] could be optimized... [my boss] gave me carte blanche... [he/she used to tell me] you must sort things out by yourself; I must say I appreciated it... working is not enough for me, I like changing things, if your supervisor doesn't give a damn..., then you feel frustrated..."*

*"I believe in the project...we are part of the system... I don't want to be a victim... I want things to be clear... I decide what the priorities are... where we can get to ..."*

*"I decided to accept [being appointed director] because it was a significant job opportunity and [I could] test with something new... there's been growth... along with the growth of the LS...it wouldn't have been possible if there hadn't been a group of people dragging the whole thing along..."*

\* **The empowerment of the staff was contextualized through the personal experiences of directors**

*"... a person that does the things but also improves on them... people are overly motivated [here]...they're happy because they feel their job is important ... and ... appreciated. And then I'm glad because they take initiatives autonomously... I follow them up on this. They're ready, willing and open... to learn new things..."*

*"... [The director] decides and sets the framework, then, according to me, what remains has to be left to [their] initiative, because if there are good ideas, if you let them produce them..., they are happier..."*

*“...my colleagues are very good and they often care more about details... I have a global vision and a different objective, maybe I’m tough....a leader cannot say “yes” to all that is proposed... I sometimes see disappointment in my colleagues’ eyes when I say... I understand... but we cannot do this...”*

*“Whenever I see people who are apathetic, I realize that maybe empowerment is the right way out. I’ve tried to do this; I don’t know to what extent... every service should have a person one can refer to ... within a defined area of activities, responsibilities, competence ... There are people who, just by being told “well now you are entrusted with that”, they’re awfully stimulated to improve.”*

**\* Potential sources of disempowerment**

*“They [i.e. academics] wanted to keep full control of the situation [in the library] ... I know I’m lacking in this respect... I have my technical objections but I don’t have the ... managerial capability... it’s a matter of levels of authority...I don’t feel I lack autonomy, rather I would like things to be better defined in a global framework...”*

*“They [i.e. the academics] had been scrutinizing me for a whole year...then... they gave me the money, carte blanche, I enforced the rules and they acquiesced...you have to give them something in exchange...”*

**◆ QUESTIONS #7 AND #8**

***The power of communication***

The directors showed as much interest and involvement as the staff in the phenomena studied, thus proving the sampling to be correct in this instance too. One said that he/she presumed that many other library directors reflected on the issues under study, because he/she trusted them, but he/she was not sure, as there was no place where such things could be discussed, not even the LS steering committee.

Here too the people were asked a double question, namely whether in-service training and communication impacted on empowerment and to what extent.

In-service training was considered by a library director “*perverted*” inasmuch as it was intrinsically connected to positions and careers. Otherwise, the topic did not stir up much enthusiasm; it seemed that it was not considered particularly relevant to the phenomena studied.

On the contrary, the implications of communication were dealt with by all the interviewees well before being specifically asked, and they caught their attention at length.

The importance of strategic communication was underlined, as the vision should be shared by everyone in order to develop a sense of belonging to the institution.

It was stressed that the LS steering committee meetings had both a functional and a strategic purpose, and that this accounted for their remarkable length and for their heavy atmosphere. Alternative models should then be found in order to make such meetings leaner and more effective. It was also noted that it was not practicable for directors to relate the gist of these meetings to the staff.

One director suggested yearly assemblies with all the staff and communities of practice for respectively strategic and functional communication, and recommended participative interactions; time constraints were considered, however, a serious drawback.

Individual and group dimensions were analyzed, as well as logistic aspects. The need for a better climate, more harmony and trust emerged. Rules and manners were recommended to make communication clearer and fairer, by creating a habit for communicating more effectively and properly.

The lack of official documents was hinted at when the absence of clear job descriptions and the need to make the committee minutes public were mentioned.

These were the main points related to communication.

\* **Communication as a prerequisite for a good climate**

*"We're lucky because we're all here... our logistic situation helps..."*

*"Harmony... clarity... the quality of life has got worse, the quality of relationships among people, there's little solidarity, little understanding, people don't listen to each other... "*

*"... Talking together has a liaising effect... if you say certain things in public... if you are given the opportunity of saying them, you no longer feel like complaining."*

\* **Communicating the vision**

*"... if we don't get the idea that this is a system that has to be shared... we should fight on principles not on budgeting... we should discuss the project in committees... we should share the project..."*

*"I get the impression they don't really feel they belong to the library...I thought it nice to hold meetings every now and then... to take our bearings. ... everybody [in the library] should be informed as to what*

*we're all doing..."*

*"... maybe there are too many of us... why should we stay there [i.e. LS steering committee meetings] talking about inconsequential things, when we should talk instead about big things that give a sense of direction?"*

**\* The pitfalls of interpersonal communication**

*"Informal information is distorted...I try to update everybody... then it depends on the relationships among people."*

*"... being an open space, everything becomes infectious..."*

*"It's important to solve one's personal problems outside the workplace."*

**\* The pitfalls of the LS steering committee meetings**

*"Team work is important ... if you insist on [talking about] your own hobby horse, team work stops and you stop too..."*

*"Not everything is discussed in committees, on purpose."*

*"... sometimes finding there [i.e. LS steering committee meetings] a fait accompli is partly annoying, then there are times when... you don't agree with that project... [and you believe] it would have been better to negotiate things before ... I know endless discussions are a problem..."*

**\* The unbearable heaviness of the LS steering committee meetings**

*"[We should] learn how to do things, allocate a set time to talk .... Committee meetings that last six hours, it's crazy! ... There's a mixture of sharing information and making decisions, sometimes people describe procedures that should have nothing to do with the committee."*

*"In my book committees lack discipline... there are people who butt in ... off topic ... I see the committee more like an exchange of information because there are things I don't know and I get to know them in the committee... maybe incidentally."*

*"I would get rid of a great deal of dialectic, I'd do it somewhere else, because we are there five hours... we could do it in two hours... it's useful because committees keep the attention high on the activity of the LS. In my opinion it's useful for a director... to get to know what happens in another library."*

*"People are tired and consequently lack motivation ... I see rather quarrelsome committee meetings, the climate is objectively too heavy..."*

## ◆ QUESTION #9

### **Summing up**

Every library director was asked to list the keywords which could best summarize the gist of the interview. One had no time to do it; there were therefore three responses.

The table below lists the most popular concepts.

**FIGURE 7: DIRECTORS' KEYWORDS**

Planning, project, vision	3
Definition of spheres of activity	2
Responsibility	2
Realism (objectives versus resources)	2

Here the first entry was not included in the questioning route, but was unanimously considered the top priority. The terms used were slightly different, but they referred to the need perceived by library directors to have a project and a vision of the future. As they all agreed that the project and the vision had to be shared with all the LS staff, the first point in the agenda became the need for strategic communication.

Some directors stressed the requirements for clear job descriptions and for clear subdivisions of responsibilities.

A hot topic was also the correspondence between resources and objectives, that is a call for realism and pragmatism in order to avoid frustration and a sense of failure.

It should be mentioned however that two directors out of four revealed their visionary side, by confessing: *"I have a dream!"*.

### **4.3. Observations**

#### **4.3.1. Aims**

The researcher observed two of the LS steering committee meetings in November and December. The aim was to see how the library directors behaved and communicated in context, to observe what they did as opposed to what they had said.

#### **4.3.2. Presentation pattern**

The researcher decided to report the outcomes in a narrative form. This section

also built on subsequent debriefing with the LS coordinator; when such was the case, the sentences were in italic (with no inverted commas, as the original wordings were abridged).

#### **4.3.3. Analysis**

The meetings were recorded but not transcribed, as they both lasted five hours and mainly dealt with technicalities. The researcher took notes during and after the sessions. She focused on the interactions of the group and refrained from going into the content, but for the discussions that pertained directly to empowerment (or disempowerment) and communication (or lack of information).

All library directors were invited, along with the LS administrative supervisor, through an informal email (reporting the agenda) sent by the LS coordinator.

*The LS steering committee is the only official and regular assembly of the LS. It can be equated to a Department board, as the LS is similar to a Department, being autonomous in expenditure and budgeting.*

*The LS steering committee has to meet to decide the requests for financing, to vote the budget and the final balance; these are the only compulsory meetings.*

*It is a political and managerial body which first started as a work group. It also deals with technical and operational issues, as there are no other places where they could be discussed.*

*The library directors then ought to report relevant decisions and discussions to their staff.*

*The LS steering committee is usually called every month.*

The meetings were held (as usual) in the office of the LS coordinator, around a long table. They both dealt, among other issues, with financing and budgeting. The place was a little stuffy as there were twelve people inside (plus the researcher). The climate was rather informal, as the participants initially exchanged bits of gossip and chat. A few people arrived late, and the meetings did not begin on time. Participants always took the same seat as if it were a ritual. There was no approval of the minutes of the previous meeting, no secretary (the coordinator acted as chair), no set time for interventions, nor a set finishing time.

The start of the meetings was always a little bouncy, as people would not be easily silenced. Even afterwards, there were parallel conversations going on as the coordinator or a library director was speaking, and the attention was not always high. The researcher was led to believe that something was bound to get lost in the confusion. Every now and then a flame would stir up, as almost everyone would feel compelled to report his/her case as unique.

In the first meeting, changes in deadlines and presentation of accounting documents were discussed. Directors asked the administrative supervisor plenty of explanations, and feelings of disappointment, tension, and frustration were palpable. During the coffee break, a few jokes were cracked, but, as soon as the discussion was resumed, more tensions arose from the uncertainty over administrative and budgeting procedures. It seemed that relevant information had been passed on informally over the time. Practices varied because the messages had been either conveyed or interpreted differently.

It was also noticed that committee decisions were frequently disowned. All attempts at standardizing rules in the libraries clashed with local peculiarities and priorities. The researcher felt that there were centrifugal forces at work.

A substantial issue was raised by the LS coordinator towards the end; the general comment was that directors did not know anything about it, and that really important things always seeped out incidentally. All library directors looked disempowered, both individually and as members of the LS steering committee, as they felt that real decisions on important things were taken elsewhere and that there was neither transparency nor clarity.

The second meeting was likewise heated and turbulent. Suspicions eventually surfaced as one director burst out: *"The committee is for everything, not only for bollocks!"*.

Discontent was voiced by another director: *"Every one of us should only coordinate"*.

Frequent digressions on personal issues held up the discussion. There seemed to be no real sense of ownership, of belonging to the LS, and deep mistrust toward the parent organization existed.

"Us and them" feelings characterized the interactions among the directors; defensive behaviours characterized the interactions between the directors and

the LS coordinator.

*Directors seem to be in competition with each other all the time. The LS coordinator is satisfied with them and trusts them, but they look compelled to show what they are worth and to what extent their libraries distinguish themselves.*

The perceptions of library directors were clearly based on defective communication and difficult personal interactions.

The observations bore out that the meetings were deficient in strategic communication and that familiarity and warmth among participants were more apparent than real.

*Library directors do not really know each other well; they have a stereotyped idea of each other.*

#### **4.4 The LS “documentary bottleneck”**

As explained in 3.1.7, documentary analysis would have been precious for triangulating the data. The researcher tried to identify and get hold of the LS institutional documents, and discussed the difficulties encountered with the LS coordinator (the coordinator’s comments are as usual in italic).

The LS website gave access to the LS bibliographic resources (OPAC, e-journals, indexes...) and services (interlibrary loan, document delivery...), and supplied information on the LS libraries. There was a special section devoted to the LS, which was however empty, but for the address and phone number of the LS headquarters.

The present LS regulation could only be found by rummaging through the University homepage in an endless list of miscellaneous regulations.

The pending regulation was known only to the directors who had been discussing it in committee meetings; they were not necessarily supposed to pass it on to the staff.

*There is no intention to withhold information or documentation; in fact whoever is interested in the future regulation can ask a director or the coordinator to show him/her. After its approval, it will be published.*

The minutes of the LS steering committee meetings were not public, but for the members of the LS steering committee members.

*They are not top secret; the staff should know where they are filed and can ask*

*the supervisor. However, the minutes would not be comprehensible to an outsider, as they are too brief.*

The LS had neither an official organization chart, nor a mission statement.

*The LS is in a transition stage.*

While operational and educational information was made public through mailing lists and shared folders - and there were special intranet pages devoted to functional issues and didactic material - there did not seem to be much to analyze as far as institutional documents were concerned.

The researcher observed that institutional documents were

- ✓ either missing (e.g. organization chart, mission statement)
- ✓ or difficult to find (e.g. present LS regulation)
- ✓ or else known only to the management (e.g. pending LS regulation)

and focused on the consequences of what she called the LS “documentary bottleneck”.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

### 5.1 *Summing up*

The literature showed that the perception of empowerment was affected by personal experiences and histories, the surrounding context, and the position in the organization. The literature also showed that organizational communication was strategic and could not possibly not be.

The feelings and opinions of the LS staff on empowerment and communication emerged from the focus groups.

The feelings and opinions of the library directors on empowerment and communication emerged from the interviews and from the observations of the LS steering committee meetings.

The researcher's attempt at documentary analysis ended up in a "documentary bottleneck".

The informal conversational interviews with the LS coordinator provided invaluable supplementary information when needed.

At this stage the researcher had to triangulate the data collected to see whether the LS staff and the library directors saw comparable connections between empowerment and communication, and whether there was any overlap between what the LS staff said and what the library directors said and did in this respect. The researcher endeavoured to find whether there was common ground for building up empowerment starting from these premises.

#### 5.1.1 Finding common ground

*"... we are autonomous enough, we have resources [given the present constraints], why can't we find a way to rule ourselves that makes us just a little less unhappy and just a little more peaceful... all this mutual aggressiveness... where does it come from?" (library director)*

##### a. Awareness of the subjective dimension

Both members of staff and directors contextualized the issues through their personal experiences and correctly underlined the high degree of subjectivity involved in their feeling of autonomy (the staff) and their propensity to delegate (the directors). This awareness was deeply interiorized, as the researcher had

not prompted it.

#### **b. Need for personal interactions**

Both members of staff and directors expressed the need for coaching, tutoring, counselling, and exchanging opinions, all forms of interpersonal communication, while performing their routine job (the staff) and at the beginning of their careers (the directors).

#### **c. Aspiration for a people-centred organization**

The human factor was highlighted at different stages by all the participants.

In listing the keywords at the end of the focus groups, the staff gave top priority to “communication”, and next to “team-working, social interactions, organizational climate”, which were not included in the questioning route.

The directors considered communication as a prerequisite for a good climate and agreed, albeit to different degrees, that it was essential to reconcile the objectives to be reached with the needs of the people, i.e. to find some middle ground between a goal-oriented and a people-centred organization.

#### **d. Importance of planning, project, and vision**

When asked to list the keywords, directors gave top priority to “planning, project, vision”, which were not included in the interview script, but were rightly felt as the main concern for management.

The staff were likewise concerned over these issues, but sceptical and disillusioned; they thought that library directors were not mature enough and had no time to think over these issues.

#### **e. Predilection for organic empowerment**

Both staff and directors showed they preferred organic empowerment. The staff expressed mistrust for possible empowerment projects being imposed upon them, while library directors welcomed the initiatives of the staff. They nonetheless comprehensibly considered as their own prerogative:

- the definition of a framework
- a global vision
- the definition of areas of activities, responsibilities and competence.

#### **f. Concern over delegation**

Delegation was seen as the potential dark side of empowerment by all participants.

Members of staff agreed that it was almost impossible to delegate correctly; library directors themselves mentioned possible excesses, ranging from being incapable of delegating to dumping responsibilities on people.

**g. “Us and them” feelings**

This theme emerged from the focus groups, from the interviews, from the observations of the LS steering committee meetings and from the informal conversational interviews with the LS coordinator. There was no cohesion between staff and directors and even less so among directors themselves.

Sense of ownership and belonging to the LS and mutual trust were lacking, though desired by everyone.

The statements above (a to g) were classified as follows:

**FIGURE 8: AGGREGATING AND DIVISIVE FACTORS WITHIN THE LS**

a	Awareness of the subjective dimension	Necessary premise to build on
b	Need for personal interactions	Potentially aggregating factors (less controversial)
c	Aspiration for a people-centred organization	
d	Importance of planning, project and vision	
e	Predilection for organic empowerment	Potentially aggregating factors (more controversial)
f	Concern over delegation	
g	“Us and them” feelings	Divisive factor

**5.1.2 Building up empowerment**

It was obvious at this stage that the directors’ and staff’s concerns overlapped:

- ✓ some issues - what Garvin would call *“high philosophy and grand themes”* (1993, 78) - were considered by the researcher to be less controversial
- ✓ other issues - what Garvin would call *“the gritty details of practice”* (1993, 78) - were considered by the researcher to be more controversial.

The point however was: were these concerns really shared? Were all the parties involved aware of that? Self-analysis, sensitivity and a reflective attitude were shown by all participants, but what if there was no place in the organization where these feelings and opinions could be exchanged and compared?

Starting from the divisive factor, i.e. the “us and them” feelings, it was clear that

it mainly derived from presumptions, stereotypes, and subcultures. The potentially aggregating factors became really aggregating factors if they were known to everybody, negotiated where necessary, and eventually shared.

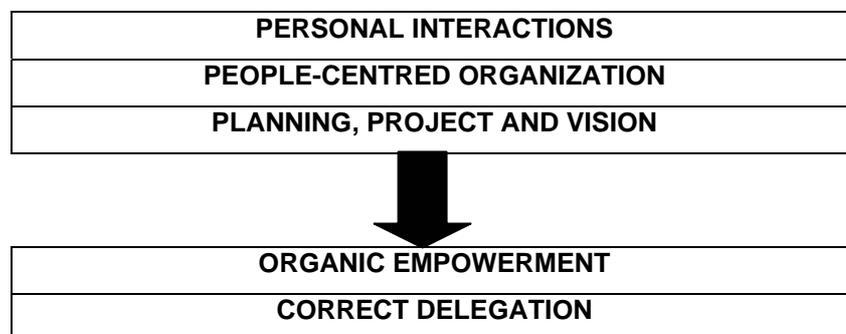
The degree of negotiation may vary:

- ✓ less controversial factors (e.g. the focus on people or the importance of planning, project and vision) would probably need less negotiation
- ✓ more controversial factors (e.g. defining the boundaries of empowerment or the prerequisites of correct delegation) would probably need more negotiation.

The necessary prerequisite in all cases, however, was communication.

Rearranging the factors, the LS could start from **b**, **c** and **d** to attain **e** and **f**:

**FIGURE 9: FACTORS LEADING TO EMPOWERMENT AND CORRECT DELEGATION**

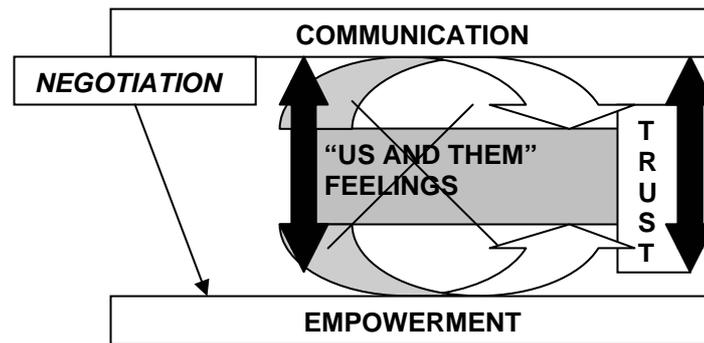


Another factor was needed, however, to overcome **g**; it recurred both in the focus groups and in the interviews, and it was observed to be lacking in the LS steering committee meetings. The factors could be further rearranged by including “trust”.

Communication contributes to building up trust (Tans Siew Chye & Higgins, 2002, 175-176) which fosters cohesion and empowerment and facilitates negotiation, by overcoming “us and them” feelings, as

- ✓ the staff should trust directors (not to feel they are being dumped on, to feel they would be backed up in case there were errors or problems, to feel free to take initiatives)
- ✓ directors should trust the staff (to delegate to them correctly, that is to entrust valuable tasks to them, appreciating what they are worth, not fearing a loss of control, not feeling disempowered)
- ✓ directors should trust each other (to work as a system and to have a global vision).

**FIGURE 10: THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE**



### **5.1.3 The empowering/disempowering function of communication**

It was essential at this stage to identify the kind of communication that best served the purposes of empowerment. As seen above, communication must foster cohesion, clarity and trust.

Informal, face-to-face communication was considered the only way to ensure coaching, tutoring and counselling.

Organizational communication however cannot be improvised. It cannot be left to the good (or bad) will of individual directors and it cannot be based on merely informal communication.

Indeed, the pitfalls of informal communication appeared when strategic information was passed on, even "cascaded" offhandedly, sometimes in a distorted or incomplete way, especially in the absence of relevant institutional documents.

Strategic communication conveys values, informs on what is changing within the organization, and creates the culture of the organization. The staff are entitled to know the organizational goals, tasks, roles, rules and habits. The management must communicate both the results that have been achieved and future targets to all the staff.

Organizations create their context by themselves, as it is essential to have a common background and to share similar values. Decision making, and therefore empowerment, is more effective if all the members of the organization share a common core of information, which supports the interpretation of communicational exchanges. This kind of common knowledge map becomes the context for communicational interactions within the organization itself

(Invernizzi, 2000, 118-122).

Accordingly, organizational communication can be a powerful tool; when improvised, underrated, or misused it has a devastating effect and creates divisiveness (Christopher, 2003, 24).

The pitfalls of communication that emerged from the data were the ignorance of the mission and vision, which disempowered the whole organization.

*“Taken together, mission, [and] vision ... create an ecology, a set of fundamental relationships forming the bedrock of real leadership.” (Senge, 1998)*

The LS lacked these fundamental relationships, and the consequences were a sense of exclusion and general mistrust.

The focus groups were enjoyed by the staff because they provided an opportunity for true exchange and comparison. Directors too enjoyed talking about the issues relevant to the study.

The lack of places and opportunities to share, talk and be listened to constructively was resented by everyone. Conversely, divisiveness was tangible.

*“... the sense of “we” is influenced by such things as how organizational members are rewarded, the extent to which organizational policy places units in competition with each other for scarce resources and employment practices that encourage investment in self rather than investment in the organization.” (Dixon, 1998, 164)*

The things mentioned above were perceived in a distorted way within the LS because ineffective or defective communication paved the way for suspicion and mistrust.

The LS steering committee meetings turned out to be heavy-going and dysfunctional because they served too many different purposes and lacked formal structure. It happened that operational issues superseded strategic topics. Then directors did not necessarily feel it was their task to report to their staff, and the flow of information stopped. The library directors agreed that the LS steering committee should deal with strategic issues. Such meetings failed therefore in their primary objective, namely creating a systems view and

overcoming local subcultures. When dealing with organizational communication, it is necessary to be clear and differentiate the functions and objectives; different aims are reached with different tools.

Operational topics should be discussed elsewhere, creating “communities of practice” and encouraging team work, thus fulfilling the need for tutoring and coaching. A general yearly assembly of the whole LS to take the organization’s bearings, communicate past achievements and future targets would help to create a sense of belonging and put forward a participatory approach, leading to an empowered organization.

*“A mission instils both the passion and the patience for a long journey.” (Senge, 1998)*

Strategic, institutional documents - which convey the mission - should be made public and the knowledge of their existence and content should be promoted.

## **5.2 Recommendations for the LS**

The following recommendations are grounded both in the literature and in the findings, as they turned out to be congruent.

Librarians should

- ✓ create communities of practice and share their expertise with their peers
- ✓ apply reflective thinking and put forward new ideas

Library directors should

- ✓ find an appropriate way to cascade relevant information to all their subordinates
- ✓ promote and encourage the initiatives of their subordinates through brainstorming and informal meetings
- ✓ overcome local subcultures and have a systems view of the LS

The LS coordinator should

- ✓ preside over strategic communication ensuring coherence and synergy
- ✓ make sure that organizational values and culture are well-known to all the staff
- ✓ publicize institutional documents effectively
- ✓ support organizational change by communicating it successfully

The LS steering committee meeting should

- ✓ develop coherent guidelines and policies
- ✓ work out clear job descriptions and tasks

Everyone in the LS should

- ✓ improve interpersonal communication skills

The LS should

- ✓ aspire for the highest level of organizational communication, that is creative communication, by promoting top down, bottom up and lateral exchanges. Creative communication is the true prerequisite for, and the real expression of, empowerment (Invernizzi, 2000, 199-200).

Yet, realism, i.e. congruity between objectives and resources, is paramount within an organization, as library directors correctly pointed out (see figure 7).

Everyone in the LS must therefore be aware that

*“The learning organization is a journey and not a destination.” (Tan Siew Chye & Higgins, 2002, 177)*

### **5.3 Recommendations for further research**

This kind of LIS research is not usual for Italian scholars, as management issues are normally dealt with from a purely quantitative approach. The researcher hopes that more attention will be devoted to similar topics from a qualitative perspective, which is more appropriate to people-centred studies.

As the concepts explored are culture and context bound, it would be extremely stimulating to have more case studies analyzing the impact of empowerment and communication on different library systems, and shedding light on their culture and values.

There was no intention here to apply the findings to the context studied in order to solve the problems of the LS, but some hints and suggestions emerged - food for thought, so to speak.

If however the need for better communication were acknowledged and if the LS decided to implement a communication plan, it would be interesting to hold a longitudinal study in the same context to assess the impact of the plan and formative evaluation would be useful.

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## **6 Reflective review**

To a novice, qualitative research is doubly difficult because it is necessary to mix a high degree of creativity with a high degree of rigour.

The research design proved to be effective, given the inexperience of the researcher, who however realized in time that the topic had to be narrowed down to be managed successfully.

The literature review provided relevant theories which were confirmed by the findings.

The sampling technique proved to be correct. Given the limited resources available, the researcher had to choose depth instead of breadth and studied a very small sample made up of information rich cases.

The data collection tools were appropriate to the approach chosen and to the population targeted. They provided insight into the perceptions of the staff and library directors.

The researcher was frustrated by her unsuccessful attempt at documentary analysis. Still, the informal conversational interviews with the LS coordinator helped her understand the documentary flows (or bottlenecks) within the LS. This information was relevant to the focus of the research.

Data collection took nine weeks, and it was hard to accommodate the research schedule and the participants' work engagements. Luckily enough, the LS coordinator had decided that the time that the directors and staff devoted to the interviews and focus groups would be considered as paid working time.

Transcriptions were time-consuming, notwithstanding the researcher's good typing skills. Owing to lack of experience, and her busy agenda, it was not always possible to manage the simultaneous gathering and analyzing of the data.

Doing research requires total dedication, in terms of time and of concentration, and this was not the case, as work and family could not be put off!

However, the researcher's working milieu coincided with the research environment itself. This implied that the researcher's observation of the context was ongoing, and that there were plenty of opportunities to keep in touch with informants in a natural and unstructured way.

Again, the researcher's inexperience resulted in overlapping roles and activities,

and often not being able to define the boundaries between work and research. The reflexive journal was a formidable aid in keeping track of everyday intuitions, thoughts, and achievements. It was at times the receptacle of the researcher's frustrations and feelings of inadequacy.

It would have been advisable, however, to be more scrupulous in keeping accurate and detailed field notes.

The researcher also found it difficult at the beginning to conceptualize the research by writing her ideas down. The first draft was painful, and the researcher wishes she had followed more closely the recommendations of experienced scholars on the habit of writing; she would probably have been able to get over her "writer's cramps" earlier.

Time and inexperience were unquestionably the major constraints, but overall the study was successful in reaching its aims and objectives.

Still, there are a few considerations which are worthwhile making.

If the researcher had had more time (and experience), she would have:

- a. selected a broader sample, while preserving in-depth analysis
- b. interviewed members of staff individually
- c. held a focus group with library directors
- d. observed the interactions of librarians in context
- e. stepped back from the study for a while, then gone back to it with a fresh mind to check the analysis and interpretation of the data.

In fact the researcher was aware that:

- a. there were other information-rich cases which would have been worth analyzing
- b. focus groups were invaluable as they were the result of the interaction of the participants. Sometimes, however, people may influence each other. Interviewing people individually would have double-checked the outcomes
- c. conversely, it would have been extremely interesting to interview the directors together, as a group, and see how the discussion would have developed. On the other hand, in this case the researcher would have needed considerable expertise and self-control to manage potential conflict properly in order to gather the relevant data and steer the focus group along its true course

- d. an ethnographic observation of real-life routine work in context would have been a powerful means to gain awareness of what people did and how they behaved as opposed to what they said. Unobtrusive observation would have been almost impossible, though, and the presence of the researcher would have altered the natural setting and caused tension
- e. temporary detachment would have made a critical review of the study more effective, as the researcher would have had an opportunity to rise temporarily above her deep involvement in the case.

In fact, the research process - the way it evolved from the initial stage of choosing the broad topic to the final, frantic stages of parting with the product of the research itself - was incredibly absorbing. The researcher felt a thrill of excitement every time the chain of evidence pointed to an unexpected finding and every time she managed to disclose a pattern in the data. Conversely, she felt a pang of discomfort whenever she sensed to be at a dead end, stuck and hopeless. It was altogether a very rich experience, and she thoroughly enjoyed the creative side of it, while striving to ground theories in the data and to justify every single statement by providing sufficient evidence.

*“SAY NOT “I HAVE FOUND THE TRUTH” BUT, RATHER, “I  
HAVE FOUND A TRUTH.” GIBRAN KAHLIL GIBRAN*

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**All sites were last accessed on May 12th, 2005**

# APPENDIX

## ***I. Endorsement letter***

Dear colleague,

Thank you for accepting to be interviewed. I hope that this interview/focus group will not only be a tool to collect the data for my Master's dissertation but also a chance to think about our organization.

My aim is to know your perceptions and opinions on "hot" issues such as the concepts of leadership and empowerment in libraries.

There obviously are no right or wrong answers, just your own answers.

Anonymity will be guaranteed both while collecting the data and in the "narration" of the research.

I ask your consent to tape our conversation in order to be able to analyze at leisure the emerging themes.

The coordinator has decided that the time you devote to this meeting will be considered as "paid working time".

Thank you again for cooperation and I would ask you to sign your consent to the anonymous use of the data and to the taping the interview/focus group.

## ***II. Focus group questioning route***

*Opening question:*

1. How did you start working in a library?

*Introductory question:*

2. What are the boundaries of your autonomy in your job at present?

*Transition questions:*

3. What does the term "empowerment" make you think of?
4. What are the advantages, disadvantages and limitations of delegation?

*Key questions:*

5. According to you what are the determinant factors of empowerment?

6. What must a good leader do to give more autonomy to his subordinate?
7. Do you consider these issues important for your organization and for you?

*Interviewees have always introduced the concept of communication before being asked:*

8. Are in-service training and communication relevant to empowerment?

*Final question:*

9. Is there something else to say? Please take the sheet of paper in front of you and list your own “keywords” (to sum up the gist of what we have been saying up to now).

### **III. Interview script**

*Opening question:*

1. How did you become a director? What did you do before?

*Introductory question:*

2. How do you spend your working time now? What leadership style do you think you have?

*Transition questions:*

3. What does the term “empowerment” make you think of? What are the boundaries of your autonomy in your job at present?
4. What are the advantages, disadvantages and limitations of delegation?

*Key questions:*

5. According to you what are the determinant factors of empowerment?
6. What does a good subordinate have to do to be empowered?
7. Do you consider these issues important for your organization and for you?

*Interviewees have always introduced the concept of communication before being asked:*

8. Are in-service training and communication relevant to empowerment?

*Final question:*

9. Is there something else to say? Please take the sheet of paper in front of you and list your own “keywords” (to sum up what we have been saying up to now).

#### ***IV. Personal forms***

Name	
Age	
Category	
Education and training	
What do you do at present?	
How long have you been doing it?	
Personal comments (if any)	