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# Leadership Lessons in a Climate of Social Transformation

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# Leadership Lessons in a Climate of Social Transformation

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College and university libraries—regardless of organizational, environmental, or cultural differences—face many issues in common, which are brought about by important and rapid social transformations. Daily we struggle with social questions such as which segments of our society are encouraged to attend college and for what purpose, when is research ready to be shared with the public, how does scholarship affect learning, and what responsibility does higher education have to the broader society. Understanding the social transformations we face as academic librarians is crucial to our ability to participate fully in achieving the campus agenda. Yet, librarians can often get distracted by the more immediate challenges, such as those posed by economic stress or by the urgency of adopting new and

emerging technologies for improved services to our clientele or improving the workplace for staff.

Library leadership cannot afford to act solely on the basis of such uncertainty and indeterminacy. As real as these challenges are, leadership must also focus on the centrality of human purpose in an organization. It is human purpose, Joan Magretta writes in her book *What Management Is*, "that animates organizations in the first place."<sup>1</sup>

The essence of management is to seek ways of transforming that human purpose into performance. It follows that a leadership style grounded in virtues is crucial in order to link human purpose to building the library's organizational capacity.

## **Leadership and Virtues**

If it is the responsibility of leaders to sustain an organization and its shared values and to create opportunities for change, then a significant portion of that responsibility lies in leadership's ability to relate an organization to its social context. For an academic institution, this entails the provision of opportunities for advanced learning, research, and outreach to the broader society. Despite those characteristics that differentiate colleges and universities and their libraries from one another—including mission, environment, and culture—academic leaders have in common such virtues as *trust*<sup>2</sup>, *integrity*<sup>3</sup>, *civility*, *accountability*, and *the ability to foster collaboration* among people in organizations. These characteristics are so widely accepted that they seem to be almost intuitive for effective leadership. On the other hand, leaders often find them very difficult to sustain in practice on a daily basis.

Trust defines an ideal social relationship; and, in higher education, trust is constantly challenged by political, economic, cultural, and social forces. Trust is also upheld by libraries when they assume responsibility for the preservation of knowledge created, made accessible, and contained in various media, whether in print, non-print, or digital format. This is more than the assumption of custodial responsibilities. Trust undergirds the time-honored associations among

libraries, their clientele, and those who sustain libraries financially, including parent institutions and benefactors.

Integrity has far reaching implications for defining a leader's capacity for decision-making within a broader community. There is substantial debate over the meaning of integrity for the individual. Where leadership is concerned, it may be useful to see "acting with integrity" as a way of suppressing self-interest for the good of the community—in other words, making decisions with an appreciation of the broader social context and institutional and professional values. Do decisions regarding physical and virtual resources take into consideration access requirements and the persistent digital divide within student populations? How does one weigh the differing needs of undergraduate and graduate students? These decisions are predicated upon a leaders' understanding that integrity involves looking out for the common good of the institution over self-interest or self-promotion.

Civility, as Stephen L. Carter has defined it, "is the set of sacrifices we make for the sake of our common journey with others, and out of love and respect for the very idea that there *are* others."<sup>4</sup> A career of service in academic libraries can teach us that it is not enough to appreciate or value diversity for its own sake, as though recognizing or acknowledging differences is enough to create a community based on civility. It is paramount that leaders understand and act on the belief that there is a common journey shared by many "others." Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to academic library leadership is dealing with acts of incivility between employees. It must be understood that the consequences of incivility are often at the root of a library's inability to accomplish much and may often serve as an obstacle to collaboration.

Many leaders often view the phrase "being held accountable" as a pejorative, a requirement placed on their organizations replete with a presumption of guilt. However, as John Marchica has written in *The Accountable Organization*,

Instead of focusing solely on assigning blame and punishment, there is a more constructive, healthier way to understand accountability—one that is crucial for building an Accountable Organization.<sup>5</sup>

*Self*-accountability is realized in the everyday practice of eye-level accountability. Eye-level accountability, as Marchica defines it, is the balance of responsibility between organizations and their clientele or between organizations and their employees.<sup>6</sup> In other words, accountability as a virtue of leadership is no more than leaders' integration of the virtues of trust, integrity, and civility in achieving purpose and building the capacity of an organization. Accountability, then, is little more than the practice of self-discipline.

Finally, libraries have a long and successful history of cooperation—performed primarily to contain costs and make efficient use of resources. Yet the migration from cooperation to collaboration demands a more integrative approach to managing social transformation. Collaboration provides the necessary ingredients for building purposeful relationships between libraries and other academic, research, and support services across campuses and between libraries and faculty in fostering student learning through innovations in classroom instruction. Collaboration also offers a way of mutually seeking to address broad problems in common rather than merely agreeing to work together on limited issues in common. Within an organization, collaboration means that rather than restructuring an organization to impose cooperation in the workplace, it is more important to remove the barriers to collaborative activity among employees.

Leadership that embraces and demonstrates virtues empowers staff while simultaneously serving the best interests of the larger organization. Libraries are organized for the purpose of value creation. If society sees value in the services of libraries, it will be because we continue to provide service that meets societies changing needs. Value creation, together with collaboration among employees, builds organizational capacity. Library leadership should challenge the status quo in organizations. By fostering collaboration within libraries and in association with other campus services, leadership can engage staff in charting the future of the library.

## References

1. Joan Magretta, *What Management Is: How It Works and Why It's Everyone's Business* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 194.
2. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. "Trust," <http://plato.stanford.edu/contents.html#c> (accessed July 20, 2006).
3. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. "Integrity," <http://plato.stanford.edu/contents.html#c> (accessed July 20, 2006)
4. Stephen L. Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 23.
5. John Marchica, *The Accountable Organization: Reclaiming Integrity, Restoring Trust* (Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black, 2004), 17.
6. *Ibid.*, 18.