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New Perspectives in Leadership

How to Lead from the Middle with Evidence-Based Decision Making: A Conversation with a New Department Head

Leo S. Lo and Adriana Gonzalez

Introduction

The position of department head is one of leadership, charged with the challenges of developing the department's future. To achieve that, a department head has to be able to persuade, influence, and communicate with not only his/her department members, but the senior administration of the library. Department members tend to falsely think that the head has unlimited power to solve all of their problems. On the other hand, the senior administration might want conflicting things than that of the department members. How does a department head, sandwiched between the two very different groups, make his/her decisions?

Recently, I sat down with Adriana Gonzalez, the Head of the Faculty and Graduate Services Department at Kansas State University (K-State) Libraries to talk about this challenge. And I believe that her answers provide a very practical model for other department heads or future department heads to emulate.

Adriana has an impressive leadership record. In her previous role at Texas A&M University, Adriana served as the Coordinator of Research Services, overseeing 18 staff members across 4 service points within 2 buildings. She has also served as Chair of the LLAMA Mentoring Committee, and was a selected member of the Minnesota Leadership Institute, and the ALA Emerging Leaders Program. Currently, she serves as the Co-Chair of the ACRL Scholarships Committee, and as the Facilitator of the K-State Libraries' E-Portfolio Task Force. Additionally, she actively serves on University committees such as the Women of K-State Leadership Group, the University's Honors Council, and as a grant proposal reviewer for the Office of Research and Sponsored Projects. She currently leads a team of 9 librarians, and has general oversight of 3 branch libraries at K-State Libraries.

Q: I understand that you place a very high value on assessment. How did you come into the realization that it was needed for your leadership of the department?

One of the first major responsibilities I had was to develop the departmental strategic plan in a very short period of time, which was January to May of 2013. I had only been at K-State for four months, when I then needed to craft the departmental strategic plan. As a brand new department head being tasked to do something that I had no experience doing, I was forced to look deeper within myself to identify what I needed to first learn in order to move forward. My first year was marked as my learning phase.

In that time period, I took the opportunity to learn about my University, my library, and my team. I needed to gather more evidence before I made any significant changes to the direction we were moving in, therefore, I realized early on that assessment was a must and I realized that I absolutely needed help from an assessment librarian. The real question for me became, how in the world do I do this?

Q: So, what did you do next?

So, I collaborated with you, as our assessment librarian to devise a plan. I had already noticed that there were areas that perhaps could be focused on in order to make assessment work on our behalf. There were 3 areas that I felt could use attention:

One, I felt that as a department we lacked the confidence in ourselves to do effective assessment. Two, I felt that we could better utilize available resources to have a more practical approach towards assessment. And third, I felt that there was room to strengthen our culture of assessment.

Q: Confidence is a complicated thing. In a way, it's hard to obtain and easy to lose. How do you plan to instill confidence in you team members?

There are several things we can do that I believe would not only instill confidence, but also increase our knowledge base and understanding of assessment. The first thing I would do is offer the team expert training from hopefully a neutral, outside perspective to teach us more in-depth methodologies that would include instrument development, and the ability to identify when, how, and what instruments to use effectively. I would also want the expert to show us how to ask the right questions so that we can get the real answers we're after.

The second thing I would do is through a group discussion, identify one to two key areas that the group felt strongly about to assess. As you know, I've done this with my department by inviting you to facilitate that discussion. Your neutrality facilitated the discussion by keeping my own bias and opinions out of the discussion. They spoke freely about what they felt most strongly about. I really appreciated this and after this discussion is how space was identified as a major focus area for us.

Thirdly, I would encourage my team to conduct quick assessments of non-traditional activities such as our new graduate student workshop series. Doing these types of quick assessments lend themselves to a quick return, and then a quick reaction or change. Follow-through and implementation of immediate changes, I feel helps individuals gain confidence because they can see the results and changes in a very timely fashion. The more often this type of assessment is done, the better the instrument will become.

Lastly, the thing I would do as a department head is to not believe that I have all the answers and that somehow I know everything there is to know about assessment. What I need to do and be comfortable doing is to refer my team to other resources, such as you, our assessment librarian. I don't have to be the expert, necessarily.

Q: I can see some very deliberate and very practical actions in your approach. I really enjoyed facilitating your department discussion. I felt that since I wasn't their supervisor, and I wasn't there to judge or evaluate them, they were very open with me, and I got a lot of useful information out of that session.

Creating a culture of assessment seems to be the Holy Grail of the library world right now. How are you going to achieve that?

Great question, let me tell you about my approach to creating an assessment plan for my department. I'm a pretty organized person, and because of that, I need to always have at least some sort of plan in place and an end goal to reach. So, what I've done for myself, basically is create a 10-step program. I'll just briefly go through each step now.

Step 1 was to learn everything I could possibly learn about my library and my team. I've asked a lot of questions in my first year, and still consider myself to be in the learning phase. I think this is one of the beauties of assessment; it's always a learning exercise.

Step 2 was to make assessment a priority. I did this very early on for the department by simply stating that assessment was one of three departmental priorities. I needed assessment in order to learn about our activities before I made any changes to anything.

Step 3 was to identify assessment goals or focus areas. I did this by inviting you to start those discussions with the department. The department identified space as a major area of interest. As we move forward with these discussions, I will continue inviting you, as the neutral person to ensure an objective perspective.

Step 4 will be to create the vision or product. It's where we see ourselves going or what we see our final product to be.

Step 5 will be to propose the plan in a more concrete way to the administration. At this point, it would only be an assessment plan. No request for resources would be necessarily made at this time.

Step 6 will be to do the actual assessment. This is probably the most arduous and time-consuming step because it will include instrument development, then the actual collecting and analysis of data. It is during this step that the vision or product will probably be revised according to our assessment.

Step 7 will be to present the findings to administration, with the proposal of our vision or product. It is at this time that I would also present resource needs, i.e. space, money, staff, etc.

Step 8 would be to implement the plan. The green flag would be dropped and we would start the changes, in a planned way since I realize that not everything can be done at once.

Finally, steps 9 and 10 are to reassess and re-adjust.

This is what assessment is to me, a continuous and constant cycle. I'd like to think that the department will always be in a state of change and evolution. Piece of cake, right?

Q: How long do you think this will take? And what will the end result look like?

Well, I ambitiously and perhaps naively think that this will take about 2 years. Yet, a seasoned pro in libraries informally commented to me that I should actually expect this to take something like 5 years to reach the end. So, now I'm a little more comfortable pushing us to an average of those time frames, may be more realistically, it'll take 3.5 years.

What I want at the end of all this is to strengthen our culture of assessment. I think I'll know when we've reached that stage when it is truly seen by the department as an investment. I also think that at this point, the team will show more genuine interest through carefully constructed questions to gather the best data possible. The assessment will have meaning to us and the results will be actionable; AND assessment will be second nature to us.

Q: Now that you have been a department head for over a year, could you share what you have learned in terms of leading from the middle?

There's a quote I really appreciate that I feel summarizes my answer to this question nicely. The quote is "Evidence-based management is conducted best not by know-it-alls but by managers who profoundly appreciate how much they do not know." This is a quote from an article in the Harvard Business Review by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton.[1] I certainly relate to this quote given the fact that I've been humbled the realization of how little I know.

I also appreciate the approach of using evidence-based decision-making because it is a shared process with my team. I've learned that greater investment of time and energy is made when someone feels like they are a part of the process and solution. This is what I want for my department to feel and be a part of. I've learned that as a middle-manager, I need both my team and my administration simultaneously, and the best way for me to manage both sets of expectations is to use evidence as I carry out the vision.

Reference

[1] Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton, "Evidence-Based Management," *Harvard Business Review* January 2006: 63-74.

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