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Navigating by the Stars: Library Leadership Lessons

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Abstract

In this unique and interactive Lively Lunch, participants will engage with four librarians with backgrounds in technical services and collections who transitioned to leadership roles. While some were thrust unexpectedly into the role, others followed a directed career trajectory. Yet, they all share the commonality of facing unforeseen challenges while seeking to emerge from the depths of inexperience. They will briefly share their experiences in leadership, as well as strategies for preparation, challenges they continue to face, and lessons they are still learning. Participants will learn about developing a personal leadership practice, as well as networking, mentoring, and professional development to prepare for senior leadership positions. They will also gain practical advice on managing the interview process and surviving the early days of the job. The panel will provide participants with a leadership "toolkit" that includes suggested readings, professional organizations, and educational opportunities, adding recommendations from participants throughout the Lively Lunch session.

Introduction

This session featured four librarians with backgrounds in technical services and collections who are in leadership roles. While some were thrust unexpectedly into leadership, others followed an intentional career trajectory. They all share the commonality of facing unforeseen challenges while seeking to emerge from the depths of inexperience. They briefly shared their experiences in leadership, as well as strategies for preparation, challenges they continue to face, and lessons they are still learning. Questions from attendees prompted discussions about developing a personal leadership practice, as well as networking, mentoring, and professional development to prepare for formal leadership positions, including managing the interview process and surviving the early days of the job. The panel provided participants with a collaborative toolkit that includes suggested readings, professional organizations, and educational opportunities. Readers are invited to continue adding resources to the toolkit at https://tinyurl.com/y9xvvcee

Annie Bélanger

I am often the odd one out, coming to librarianship with a keen interest in management. Having been involved in management before my degree, I angled my professional development interests around management as I navigated my career.

After discovering little room for growth in corporate libraries, I leaped over to public libraries, holding three jobs of progressing seniority in fewer than three years, never balking at an opportunity. First, I made a lateral move into an R1 library as the head of Information Services & Resources, seizing every project I could within the library, campus, and consortia. Simultaneously, I became a consultant at a large software firm, working with the CEO. Moving internally to the position of assistant university librarian (AUL), I held two positions in the early years: head of Collection Development and head of the Architecture Library. Each role allowed me to gain a skill, lean into discomforts, and polish rough spots, making me an interdisciplinary leader.

I attended the Library Skills Management Institute. Learning about participatory approaches to leadership was a pivotal moment in leading instead of managing. I mentored others through a homegrown leadership institute, using a peer-learning approach. Reading *One Page of Paper*, I developed leadership maxims—sayings that help to visualize how I lead: "Make explicit the implicit. You can only eat an elephant one bite at a time, so take one; there is no perfect bite. Consultation is like a gobstopper,

multilayered." I also read *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*; as an action-oriented person, I had to slow my pace to build in empathy and reflection and to know when the next thing to do was actually taking us away from our overall goal.

I learned, through difficult interpersonal situations, to restructure a stand-alone library into the main one, and how to manage with respect and empathy first while energizing others, rarely deterred by "we have tried that before"—asking what is different now while also honoring expertise. One tool that I use is the BID method—Behavior/Impact/Difference. I have modified it as a positive tool by starting with the positive intent, what was observed, how it impacted me or others, and then asking the questions "help me understand what was going on for you," and "how would we do this differently in the future?"

I attended the ARL Leadership Fellows Program, expecting a lot of training and quickly readjusting my expectations. It is about exposing fellows to different approaches to leadership, environments, and networking opportunities; it asks "Is this for you?" The biggest impact it had on me was twofold: a shift (1) from operations to strategic and (2) from local to systems thinking.

In deciding if I wanted the next level of leadership, I had to really think of what kind of institution and values would be a good fit for me and my institution. I knew my leadership values and my preferred approach—I am a high-engagement, high-touch appreciative leader. Coming from an R1, the knee-jerk reaction is to stay in an R1. I knew that I value students' experience above all else, so I would want liberal education. I am fast-paced, energetic, passionate, and risk-taking, so a younger institution on the leading edge that would value these qualities rather than see them as flaws would be ideal. I believe libraries are bastions of democracy, so I would want to be part of a university that sees itself as part of the common good.

When you consider leadership, it is critical to ask "why a leader?" If the answer is power, ask again because leading through power, you soon will be left alone. Next, ask "how a leader?" Resonance between personal values and leadership values needs to be there for authenticity and for personal happiness. Dissonance in an ecosystem leads to extinction. Then ask "when a leader?", "what is your voice as a leader?", and "how do you cultivate your practice?"

Every day, I continue to learn, to forgive myself every day for being human. To be a vulnerable leader is to walk that line of being confident and owning my mistakes; to quiet my voice so others can be heard, but not be so quiet that they feel they are not being led—to give myself time.

I see my role first and foremost as a culture leader. And for that to work, I need to develop processes and a framework that build a strong work culture and ecosystem that empowers others to lead throughout the organization, to take risks and learn from mistakes (or fail forward), to be agile and leading the change, and to be fast and yet standards based. My collections background gave me skills related to project management, negotiation, budgeting, pitches, legal agreements, and liability mitigations. These skills, combined with community engagement learnings, have allowed me to be everybody's dean and for everyone to feel that way. Like the small-town mayor, I can roll my sleeves up and follow the conversations into the weeds, but bring them back to the positive outcomes we seek.

Mellissa Hinton

I have worked at the Long Island University (LIU) Post Library for over thirty years. During that time, I served as a library faculty member as a cataloger, head of Acquisitions, head of Technical Services, and assistant dean for Technical & Digital Services. Unlike our co-panelist, Annie, who followed a trajectory toward leadership, I was thrust into the role of acting dean of libraries suddenly in summer 2016. I became the epitome of the "Accidental Director" described by Diane Klare in her 2017 article and, as such, faced a number of challenges she outlined.

Allow me to share some background about my institution and the position I held. LIU is a multicampus institution with residential campuses in Brooklyn and Brookville, New York, and regional, smaller campuses. LIU offers undergraduate and graduate degrees including doctoral-level programs. The dean of LIU Libraries is responsible for library resources and services at all campuses. Librarians at the residential campuses have faculty status but belong to separate bargaining units with unique contracts. There is much to navigate in a multicampus environment.

In July 2016, the dean announced her resignation and asked me to serve as acting dean. This position was not one I ever considered and I deliberated long

and hard about serving. Since the dean of libraries is responsible for faculty promotion and tenure recommendations, I felt an obligation to my colleagues to assume the role. I agreed to serve for one year with the intention to return to my faculty line by September 2017. I expected a national search for a dean to be successful. I believe having a leader with experience outside of LIU is better for my institution. My experience provided me with a good foundation for serving as dean. People are people and problems and issues arise at every level of supervision. Situations may differ, but a response based on sound managerial expertise is translatable across many examples of leadership.

Moving into a leadership position as dean within your home institution brings both advantages and disadvantages. Advantages include:

- Understanding the organizational culture and history;
- Knowing members of the organization and who is responsible for what;
- Being familiar with the complicated library budget structure;
- Having knowledge of collective bargaining unit contracts.

A significant disadvantage, however, is that people who used to be your friends and colleagues suddenly regard you as a member of the "other" side, a somewhat contentious position in which to be. Diane Klare addresses this issue. She cautions that a new leader might face a "sense of personal displacement or emotional loss" and should plan to "reinvent" her/himself "in transitioning from peer to supervisor over those . . . previously treated as equals." She advises the new leader to use self-reflective techniques and emotional intelligence to adapt.

In thinking about self-reflection, I consider my skills within a framework outlined by Subir Chowdhury in *The Difference: When Good Enough Isn't Enough*. Demonstrating STAR attributes, a good leader is:

- **S**traightforward
- **T**houghtful
- **A**ccountable
- **R**esolute

I have a reputation for being straightforward and thinking things through. I believe in not shirking responsibility. I am open to ideas, but when my mind is made up, I do not waffle. These qualities helped me face a number of challenges unique to my situation:

- Managing two individual campus libraries with shared but different needs;
- Striving to find balance;
- Warding off the perception of favoritism toward the Post campus;
- Commuting!

Management skills I developed in technical services include:

- Setting targets, meeting deadlines, managing projects, and following through;
- Responding to problems using a common-sense approach;
- Abandoning micromanagement!

I was fortunate in having exceptional support throughout the year, especially with administrative team members who made my life easier. As AY 2016–17 ended, I returned to my faculty line. I am grateful for having had the opportunity to serve as dean. It gave me a new respect for administrators and the challenges they face as ambassadors to the larger organization on behalf of the library. What the future holds is anyone's guess, but isn't that true of life in general?

Erin Gallagher

My fascination with all things collection development started during a graduate assistantship while receiving my MLIS. I landed a position with a major book vendor upon graduation. After four years on the vendor side, I was ready to be back in the library and took the position of E-Resources and Serials librarian at Rollins College. It was in this role that I was offered my first formal leadership position supervising a staff member in the department. I grew into not only this formal leadership role, but an informal role in "leading from the middle." I was fortunate to work with two leaders whom I admired but who exhibited significantly different leadership styles. In striving to support them, I found myself leaning into leadership

not only in the department, but in the library and the college in general. After three years at Rollins, I was ready to apply my skills to a new challenge: directing a department. My current position is director of Collection Services at Reed College, where I lead a department of five librarians and staff specialists in acquisitions, serials, e-resources, cataloguing, and collection management.

In reality, there was no amount of prior planning or reading or strategizing that could have prepared me for my first leadership role. New leaders can take steps to be as prepared as possible and to manage expectations. You can find the tools I used to prepare for my first leadership role, many of which I am still using, on our Library Leadership Lessons Toolkit: https://tinyurl.com/y9xvvcee.

New leaders often encounter sensitive issues like the librarian/staff divide, departmental restructuring, or interpersonal strife. Leadership in collection development can be challenging, as we frequently lead a blend of librarians and library staff, some of whom have been working with the same systems and workflows for decades. I created elaborate and structured outlines for my first day/week/month/year of leadership, which quickly devolved into keeping my head above water every day. Much of the literature on leadership assumes a best-case scenario in which we have oodles of time to devote to planning and reading and strategizing so that on day one, we are already experts. In my case, the things I anticipated would be the most pressing challenges did not necessarily match with the realities.

What I thought would be challenging:

- Leading a team of people without knowing how to do their jobs. Believing I needed to know how to do their jobs before I could be an effective leader.
- Leading a team of people who are older than me and have a longer tail of experience.
- Adjusting to cultural differences from the East Coast to the Pacific Northwest.
- Becoming well liked.

What was (and is still) challenging:

- The time and mental energy involved in navigating interpersonal staff issues when they threaten to drive our interactions, meetings, services, and work in general.
- The group negativity dynamic.
- Finding time to devote to long-term, visionary planning for the department.
- Implementing routine practices that have not been done before within an existing cultural ecology that is sometimes directly at odds with these practices.

My relationship with my colleagues will not be the same as I progress in leadership positions. My colleagues will see me and treat me differently. While my desire to be well liked may never subside, it will become less important as I learn that the qualities of a good leader extend beyond likability. I am still learning that the very nature of my role affects my interpersonal relationships, and that there is a balance to be struck between work and social lives.

I continue to draw on lessons learned both on the vendor side and in the library:

- Communicate clearly, concisely, and effectively. Know your audience, and adjust your story when communicating the same information to different stakeholders.
- Model strength and empathy for other women who strive for leadership. Do not stay silent. Speaking up and leaning in will not damage your career prospects.
- Make decisions with library service design and systems thinking in mind. One small change can have universal implications.
- Acknowledge past hurts but always focus on moving forward together.
- Focus on the positive in public. For every negative thing you hear about a product/service/etc., say something positive.
- Asking for help is a strength, not a weakness.
- Remember these wise words from a former colleague: "No one ever died from a collection development emergency."

Jonathan Harwell

I grew up as a shy kid in the rural Deep South—the kids on the bus were sure I couldn't talk—and

in college I worked as a student assistant in our library's gifts and acquisitions unit. My postgraduate adventure was as a teacher in Albania for two years. This was my most intense time of growth, getting completely out of my home culture and language. After that I went to library school, where I met my future wife. It has been a huge benefit being able to talk things out with each other as fellow librarians—having someone who can not only support, but also understand, what we're doing. I've also learned a lot from her about being a manager. She was a manager for a library vendor for several years, and later moved on to nonprofits.

After my first three librarian jobs without major supervisory responsibilities, I came to the realization that I had grown into a leadership role without seeking it. I found that librarians were frequently coming to me with questions that would naturally be directed to a department head, and yet I was in an entry-level position—their peer, but also working for less. After several years I came to the realization that I had outgrown my position, and that I was doing much of the work of a manager. So I began to look for a place where I could grow in that role. I've now been a department head at Rollins College for five years and am in the process of promotion and tenure review as we speak. This has undoubtedly been the best move I've been fortunate to make—at a place with a tradition of innovative teaching and practice in an atmosphere of respect and excellence, with a talented team of colleagues, including a library director who has just moved on to a new role at Williams College after eleven years of transformative leadership at Rollins. Now I have the thrill of serving on the search committee for a new director.

These five years as a department head have been nearly as rapid a time of personal growth as my two years in Albania. I have learned that I'm good at helping people work through challenges, by focusing on respect and kindness. My team expects me to look for ways to support their work-life balance, to encourage their new ideas, and to work through difficulties alongside them, empowering them to handle situations themselves as appropriate. I was fortunate to supervise Erin for three years, and saw in her the quality of leadership that most people have to work toward for many years. I learned from her and others that one of the qualities I admire most is a strength in diplomacy, working with colleagues in a mutually respectful way to get things done and to make change happen. I've also learned how to communicate with superiors with confidence, which comes with practice.

I'm still learning the skills associated with discipline. I practice the method of "complimenting in public, critiquing in private." The first part comes much more naturally to me. It's the critiquing that is honestly my greatest challenge—finding that fine line between stifling someone's expression, and coaching them on how to turn negativity around and build up that reservoir of goodwill that they'll come to rely on in order to succeed.

Concluding Remarks

Librarians are not necessarily prepared for senior leadership positions by virtue of graduate degree work. Ideally, the master of library and information science (MLIS) curriculum should blend practical preparation with theory and ethical reasoning. As Jonathan Harwell's mentor, professor Dr. Marcella Genz, often said, "We're here to prepare you not for your first job, but for your last one." In other words, an MLIS should challenge students to develop ways of thinking and decision making that will serve them in a continually changing information environment, in which they might eventually become library directors or senior managers. Management coursework is a worthwhile option for electives and can supplement the MLIS curriculum in preparation for leadership. Recommended professional development opportunities include Harvard's Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians (LIAL) as well as the main LIAL textbook (Bolman & Gallos 2011) and other resources in the toolkit at https://tinyurl.com/y9xvvcee

Reference

Bolman, L. G., and Gallos, J. V. (2011). *Reframing academic leadership* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass