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The Road to Effective Leadership

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Abstract

Library leadership is one of the much-discussed subjects in library and information science. Yet, many librarians tend to shy away from using the word “leadership” and the authors wondered why. It seemed peculiar that librarians tend not to associate themselves with the context of leaders or leadership. Whether you are a driven librarian or an ambitious young librarian, or you are an ambitious and driven person, library leadership is a rather remote subject for most librarians and information professionals. Why is that the case?

This paper will explore the world of library leaders and leadership by deconstructing the myths of leadership, examining whether there is a difference between a leader and a library leader, and guiding you to become a leader through seven stages of leadership development. One of our professional societies, Library Administration and Management Association (LAMA) changed in 2008 to the Library *Leadership* and Management Association [LLAMA] in recognition of the growing importance of the issues of leadership and librarians. The LLAMA Annual Report (2008–2009) reported that the name change also presented an implicit challenge to LLAMA: “leadership” needs to move to the forefront of its activities, and resources need to be allocated to reflect and support this shift.

Research has shown that millennials and new librarians have not aspired to become leaders. This paper is directed at early career librarians who are wondering about becoming a library leader. We assume that you are curious about leadership and someday you want to be a leader, if you are not one already. The goal is to offer encouragement and guidance to young or newly minted librarians and offer much needed food for thought. The current library leaders who want to create a culture of entrepreneurship and nurture future library leaders are encouraged to join the session to share their views on leadership.

Introduction

Stueart and Sullivan (2010) noted challenges faced by today’s information-intensive library organizations’ leaders, both those who are in official leadership positions and those who are unofficially engaged in leadership by opportunity (Stueart & Sullivan, 2010). They are involved in the career development activities of others to improve both organizations and individuals. New librarians will be affected by the leaders in your organization. Given the right environment, you will flourish during your career by being guided and supported in daily operations and ongoing professional development activities. On the other hand, you may be frustrated by your ideas being thwarted, and you might feel dissatisfied with your current work in the library and information science (LIS) field.

Gordon’s (2006) research showed that new librarians are surprised and disillusioned by institutional resistance to change when they suggest new ideas or try to implement something different. Will there

be anyone in charge to ensure new librarians will be socialized and acclimated into their new library culture and workplace environment? Who do you turn to for advice and guidance about your career trajectory?

What Are We Talking About When We Talk About Leadership in the Library?

Current literature about library leaders and leadership describes the essential skills for librarians as the need to be assertive and self-aware (Mason & Wetherbee, 2004), to communicate a vision (Riggs, 1993), to empower others (Sullivan, 1999), to be innovative and creative (Sheldon, 1991), to be technically and professionally competent (Sheldon, 1991), and to have the trust of the staff and to value people (Katz, 1990). Additionally, ARL studies identified over 100 skills, traits, and areas of knowledge that are considered desirable attributes for library leaders (Hernon, Powell, & Young, 2003), such as leadership influence over a library’s effectiveness, institutional roles, and responsibilities, by examining characteristics and leadership styles (Weiner, 2003).

Leader and Leadership Defined

What is a leader? What is leadership? There are many leadership definitions. Educators, LIS leaders, and scholars are not in agreement on a single definition. Leadership can mean influencing anyone in your library organization whether above, beside, or below you on the organizational chart of your library. There are many definitions, which include manager, visionary, guide, forward thinker, developer, listener, inspirer, facilitator, and strategist. Library leaders can be an advocate, collaborative, supportive, efficient, logical, or a mentor.

To examine our own beliefs and commonly held myths about leaders and leadership, consider the following:

- Leadership is a rare and unusual talent.
- Leaders are tall white men.
- Leaders are always charismatic.
- Leaders always occupy positions of authority.
- Leaders are the only ones that can drive change.
- Leaders have all the answers.

When and how did new librarians accept the above statements without applying any critical thinking? How closely held are these notions about leadership? Are they useful?

The authors propose a simple definition that leadership is the ability to influence the behavior of others to achieve team, group, or organizational goals. In addition, leadership is a bundle of skills and competencies that can be learned and developed using deliberate practice and written reflection. Anderson, Spataro, and Flynn (2008) defined influence as “the ability to change the actions of others in some intended fashion.”

Leadership vs. Management

A recurring issue that arises within any discussion of leadership is to distinguish the differences between leaders and managers. A simple differentiating factor is that leaders are usually in the position of deciding what is to be done in any situation. A manager is principally concerned with how things will be done once such decisions are made. While managers may from time to time

exercise leadership in various aspects of their roles, strategic decision-making is the primary role and responsibility of leaders. The authors point out that someone who has the title of leader may not be the real leader in any given organization. The real leader, with or without a title, is the person who exercises the most influence on the behavior of the group. The authors propose that good leaders do several things effectively, such as delegate, build trust, inspire respect, and take an interest in people, but don't micromanage them. To be especially effective, leaders must listen broadly and well, ask good questions, develop the skills of the people they lead, and develop other leaders. The authors also assert that while there are definite differences between good and bad leaders, you can learn from both what to do and what not to do.

Succession Planning

Stanley Wilder in his 2017 article identified that ARL libraries are in the midst of unprecedented changes of the guard in leadership. He called for the action of succession planning as an imminent role to play by the current leaders in the position. As the baby boomers are aging out and retiring, there is going to be a widening gap between open leadership positions and librarians well prepared to take on leadership roles. As a result, current leaders must become intentional about creating opportunities for new leaders through programs like succession planning, mentorship in a library organization, or in the professional associations to develop their potential. Any aspiring new librarians must learn how to plan, manage their careers, and seek out opportunities for their own career development.

Succession planning is a process for identifying and developing new leaders who can replace leaders when they leave, retire, or die (Groves, 2007). The use of succession planning processes and systems can increase the availability of well-prepared, experienced, and capable librarians who are ready to assume these leadership roles as they become available. A well-implemented succession planning process includes talent identification, talent acquisition, talent development, and talent support processes to prepare aspiring librarians to successfully fulfill their future roles in your organization. These succession planning processes also help in retaining employees because they can see that the organization is invested in their development and future advancement.

The Importance of Relationships to Leadership

There are several interesting concepts in Eastern leadership that may be especially beneficial to consider and understand for new students of leadership. While most people realize the importance of relationships in managing and leading any organization, the Eastern tradition puts a special emphasis on the nature and importance of relationships from a holistic perspective. The most important aspect of the Eastern tradition may be the concept of *guanxi* (关系) (Wong, 1998). This term describes the basic dynamic of personalized networks of influence (which can be best described as the relationships individuals cultivate with other individuals) and is a central idea of many Asian societies. *Guanxi* largely originates from the social philosophy of Confucianism. There is an emphasis on implicit mutual obligations, reciprocity, and trust, which are the foundations of *guanxi* and networks. While these concepts may be Eastern in origin, they are quite useful in understanding group dynamics and organizational culture from a Western analytical perspective. The ability to understand the nature of relationships is useful for academic librarians who often find themselves in a position of servicing the user community where librarians don't have any position power over their patrons, but on the other hand, they have great influence over what they do.

Mentorship

Mentorship is proposed as a relatively easy method to begin to develop future leaders because it is a low-cost, high-benefit leadership development resource for librarians contemplating the possibility of becoming a leader. Various opportunities for mentorship are provided by the professional associations in the library field along with the possibility of finding mentors within a librarian's home institution.

There is an important distinction between mentoring and coaching. While mentors and coaches share what they know with others, to be most effective, mentoring needs to be nonsupervisory and non-evaluative, and should be a long-term relationship entered freely by both parties. Coaching means to teach something to someone else; it is short-term (Cook & Poole, 2011). Mentors often coach, but coaches are not always mentors. In addition, experience has shown that mentors are as stimulated as the mentees as they share their experiences in their institutions or in their librarianship discipline. A key

success factor for effective mentoring relationships is that it is important for both mentor and mentee to learn how to communicate better, and this will also impact the mentee's ability to become an effective leader.

The Road to Effective Leadership Development

The authors propose that because leadership is a set of skills and competencies, everyone has the potential to become a leader or to move forward as a library leader. Seven stages of leadership development are presented here:

1. **Prepare for your leadership journey** by doing a serious self-assessment of your skills and competencies to determine what you already have, what you know, and what you will need to acquire and develop as you prepare yourself as a leader.
2. **Understand emotional intelligence (EI).** Achieve a better understanding of EI and how it affects a leader's ability to connect with the people you intend to lead. You must also reflect on how good you are at leading yourself as an important first stage in learning how to lead others (Boyatzis & McKee, 2013).
3. **Develop a well-articulated written vision statement** of where you want to go as well as a written strategy to lay out how you intend to achieve your vision to become a leader.
4. **Seek out leadership opportunities.** Once you have a vision and a strategy, you need to intentionally seek out opportunities no matter how small, whether they are inside or outside your organization. You need to accumulate some leadership "mileage" with regular reflection on what you learn from your experience.
5. **Communicate your vision to others.** It is important for an aspiring leader to understand that you cannot develop by yourself; you can recruit a team to help you get where you want to go.
6. **Revisit your vision.** Use your reflections on your leadership experience to regularly adjust your vision and strategy as you progress and gain experience.

7. **Reset your vision.** Once you have reached your envisioned future, it is time to reset your vision and continue to grow as a leader by using the skills, competencies, and habits you have developed to reach this destination.

The authors believe that by deliberately progressing through these seven stages, aspiring and developing leaders will enhance the possibility of realizing their visions of becoming effective leaders. These seven stages are meant to be foundational for a career in leadership. Each stage will take time to complete, and the stages need to become an integral part of what Anders Ericsson calls “deliberate practice” (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993). He proposes five key elements for the successful use of the model of deliberate practice. That is, “leadership practitioners” will need to consistently push beyond their comfort zones, will need to strive toward specific goals, will need to focus intensely and reflectively on their “practice of leadership,” will need to integrate high-quality advice and feedback (possibly

from a mentor and/or a coach), and will need a sense of what an effective leader looks and feels like. The authors believe that the proposed seven stages of leadership development fit well into this model.

Conclusions

In an ideal situation, these stages of leadership development would be established and supported by library leaders in their own institutions or by library professional organizations as part of a well-defined and managed succession planning process. Preparing library leaders is the joint responsibility of both the aspiring new librarians and the libraries that will require their services in the not too distant future. Having a mentor or mentors who will guide, model, and advise new librarians is an important step to initiate (Freedman, 2009). Library leadership starts with developing oneself. Applying the practices of the seven stages of leadership development will be the starting point of your leadership journey. As an ancient Chinese saying goes, “A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step” (Kaltenmark, 1969).

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