

Developing Dynamic Leadership in *YOUR* Library

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Abstract

This paper, converted from a presentation given at the 2017 PNLA Conference in Post Falls, Idaho, briefly examines four areas that library professionals, regardless of experience, education level, station or title, can begin cultivating in order to better hone leadership skills. The four topics of: communication, accountability and expectations, failure, and initiative and creativity are by no means an all-inclusive list of areas needing to be examined when honing leadership skills. These areas were chosen as a base-set of common areas all aspiring—and established—leaders should focus on to begin transformational leadership change.

The intent of this paper is to begin the following three things:

- Bring awareness and understanding to one's personal leadership strategy within the four areas covered;
- Provide suggestions how to begin implementing change in one's leadership strategy in order to become a more effectual leader; and,
- Act as a resource for identifying one's own strength and weaknesses in order to grow as a leader.

WARNING!

Strong leadership is essential for any library. From the top-down and the bottom-up, every position within a library needs a dynamic individual to share their leadership skills. As the Library Director for the Billings Public Library in Billings, Montana, I strive to employ librarians, clerks, and pages who are willing to constantly hone their leadership skills. Libraries are constantly changing; and to address these changes, leadership needs to change in order to meet the new demands of a constantly changing profession. Unfortunately, the term 'management' is often misconstrued as leadership. While related, they are two very different and distinct concepts from each other. Management involves overseeing a plan so that it is successfully executed. This happens every day in a library in the form of troubleshooting a technical problem, arranging a schedule, and performing programming, among many other examples. Leadership is a bit less structured. Simplified, leadership involves creating a vision for the library, establishing a library's identity and culture, and compelling others to want to achieve and contribute to a united goal.

Developing leadership is a personalized, proactive, and consistent endeavor. All leadership paths are not created equally. All libraries are not the same. Apply your leadership strategy to the defined variables of your library. Work within the parameters of your staff, your budget, your facility, and your community. It is easy to compare your leadership with another's leadership—try not to do this. You need to focus on how best to strengthen *your* skills. Developing leadership is a daily grind. Some days will be easier than others. Some days will feel as if backslide is occurring—this is normal. Keep your ego in check as you develop your leadership. A great fallacy of leadership, especially new leadership,

is that you have to be immediately better than your predecessor. While this is not necessarily a bad goal depending on the circumstances and history of your organization, it is commonly a misplaced goal. The ultimate goal of a leader is to lead an organization in such a manner that the organization attains a new level of success. In other words, answer the following question: Are you willing to have your leadership accomplishments be only a footnote in the success story of your library?

Communication

Improving communication skills is a difficult endeavor. It takes time and patience and diligence. Of the four areas covered in this paper, communication is the foundation for all of them. There are countless ways that communication is misconstrued, not successfully executed, or simply ignored between parties each and every day within your organization. As leadership, the manner in which you communicate or do not communicate is the most important tool you employ or do not employ on a daily basis to drive your vision, support your team, share expectations, discuss failure, promote creativity and initiative, and connect with others. Without effective communication the whole organization falters.

To begin enhancing your communication skills, start by listening more than speaking. Strive to be the type of person that listens to others in such a way that they desire to speak with you. Be open to input—even if it is sometimes difficult to hear. Stay away from the default setting of being defensive about what you hear. Everyone has the right to voice their opinion—even if the opinions are overly critical. If you give those you lead the opportunity to share their thoughts through open communication, trust will develop. Communication should be geared so that it is always complete, concise without being vague, and clear in order for the message to be exchanged. Stay on message. Focus the intent of the message so that action can be implemented. Details are necessary, but should not overwhelm the communication process. Additionally, as a leader know when to communicate and when not to communicate. Sometimes less is more. Sometimes more is needed in order to gain understanding.

Be available during the communication process—both physically and mentally. Let your body language showcase that you are actively listening. Make eye contact. Reiterate main points to the messenger in order to show comprehension. Ask questions if uncertain about the message delivered. Invest your time in the communication process. If you as the leader are initiating the message, give examples about what you are sharing so others gain understanding, have the chance to ask questions themselves, and to fully realize expectations.

Most importantly, communication should be consistent. Within leadership, it is crucial that your communication is consistent to all members of your organization, your department, or your committee. If certain standards are given to one member of the team, all other members of the team should adhere to these standards—this includes leadership. Establishing this level of continuity between leadership and the team fosters an environment of inclusion and professionalism.

Finally, as leadership, take the time to understand how each different team member's personality reflects the manner in which they communicate. This is a laborious process that takes time to develop. We all communicate differently. But these differences should not be the deciding factor of how the message is exchanged, processed, and acted upon.

Accountability and Expectations

Every position in the library has certain expectations associated with its job description and responsibilities. As leadership, one of the expectations connected to this role is being the face of the organization, or the department, or the committee that the individual leads. During times of success, being the leader is a wonderful experience. But what about times of distress? What are the expectations of leadership now? And who is accountable? Unfortunately, many organizations have seen leaders within these circumstances shift the blame from leadership to other staff workers who have a limited voice. Obviously, this is a toxic leadership strategy that in the end solves nothing while also creating a culture of mistrust, confusion, and timidity for staff members.

To establish healthy and transparent expectations and accountability within an organization, leadership should not only thoroughly explain and share their expectations for the staff, department, or committee, but also ask their staff, department, or team what their expectations are for the leader. Creating this avenue of discourse—information sharing—allows for greater transparency, understanding, and the establishment of accountability. Once leadership has shared their expectations, and has also received the expectations of their staff, leadership should further the conversation to the many different organizations, partnerships, and stakeholders associated with the library, when applicable. Understanding the expectations of the Library Board, the Foundation Board, the Friends of the Library, public stakeholders, elected officials, and community members will ensure that all parties are given a voice for the advancement of the library. Moreover, understanding expectations will also set a precedent for accountability. It is extremely difficult to hold someone accountable if they do not understand what is expected of them. Ultimately, the expectations leadership holds their staff, department, or committee to should be able to be reciprocated in the expectations the staff, the department, or the committee holds for leadership.

Failure

Failure should always be looked upon as a constructive and informative opportunity for development. Oftentimes this is not the case and is looked upon as an opportunity to assign blame or to castigate an idea. To thwart this mindset, leadership needs to rewrite the failure narrative. In rare cases failure is catastrophic, or unrecoverable, or permanently damaging. In most cases, failure is common; or has evolved from other experiences that have given insight or guidance for future success; or is even premeditated, strategic, and intentional.

Enabling staff to fail, leadership gains many positive outcomes. Instead of fear of reprisal for failing, staff who know that failure is part of the progression toward success feel emboldened to challenge themselves, each other, and their departments to incorporate new ideas or processes. Instead of creating a culture that assigns blame, the allowance of failure helps cultivate a culture of ownership for one's failure which then encourages growth, collaboration, and new direction. And instead of a having a fear of being isolated in one's failure, the allowance of failure as an organization creates a team mentality that enforces the concept of togetherness, interdependence, and innovation. Failure is normal. Ultimately, it is what leadership does with failure that directs future success. Failure does not happen in a vacuum. So in order to apply what was learned during failure, leadership must strive to understand the failure. The following steps are a straightforward approach to begin understanding failure:

1. Identify the variables that failed;
2. Study them as an individual first, then study them as a team to gain insight and consensus of why something failed;
3. Make adjustments and try the endeavor again; and,
4. Repeat the process.

Learning from failure is one of the greatest assets a leader can employ to move an organization toward success.

Initiative and Creativity

It should come as no surprise that leadership does not have all the answers or always have the most creative idea when trying to rectify a problem. Instead of forcing creativity or initiative to happen, leadership needs to establish a culture of honoring creativity and initiative. Most leaders will say that they do this. But if you take the time to ask their staff, their department, or their team if this is actually the case, the feedback will give a contradictory reality. Oftentimes, in order to solve a problem, leadership will encourage creativity and initiative in their team, but really want the problem solved a certain way—their way. Repeatedly doing this is a surefire way of not only hampering possible good ideas, but also creating a stifling culture of exclusion. Leadership needs to be a cheerleader for their team. Encouragement and incorporation of creativity and initiative has to be honest and sincere. This means trusting in your team, giving them the resources and time to solve a problem, and to be open-minded with the results given.

A common misconception about leadership is that leaders need to make all the decisions. In reality, leadership needs to be able to back all the decisions made of their staff, their department, or their team based on the guidance given from leadership. If done correctly, leadership that is able to establish a culture of creativity and initiative will embolden staff to take full ownership of their job responsibilities within the library. A leader who embraces creativity and initiative is one that feeds the drive of their team; accepts new perspectives; is part of the team; actively listens; and is constantly building up their team. Conversely, the leader who says they want creativity and initiative, but, who in fact wants to create automatons, is one who is overly critical; has a my-way-or-the-highway mentality; is on the outside looking in (or worse: is Monday-morning quarterbacking); talks more than listens; and tears down their team for not doing something the “right” way. It is easy to see how comparatively different these two styles are from each other. Additionally, leadership needs to encourage curiosity amongst their staff, their department, or their team. There are numerous ideas that never become realized because leadership has not allowed curiosity to blossom. Leaders who encourage thinking, researching, reading, exploring, and the application of new ideas soon realize the immense potential of creativity and initiative among their team to drive innovation, which then makes it possible for the library to best serve today’s patrons, stakeholders, and partners.

Conclusion

Focusing on the four topics discussed in this paper allows for aspiring—and established—leaders to begin understanding their strengths and weaknesses in these areas regarding their personal leadership style and strategy. Fully developing these areas is not achieved overnight. Be patient with the process. Learn from your past mistakes in these areas. Be bold in your leadership. Be innovative in your leader-

ship. Be fearless in your leadership. Strive to be the type of leader you would like to follow.