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New Leadership For Libraries: Who Has the Right Stuff?

Eric C. Shoaf

Clemson University, shoaf@clemson.edu

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Who has the right stuff?

by Eric C. Shoaf

How does one write about leadership when so much has been written already? A quick search of Library Literature Online nds 561 articles on leadership over the past 14 years, Social Science Abstracts returns 6,201, and Wilson Business Abstracts produces a staggering 11,533 hits under a keyword search for leadership.

These online databases cover less than 20 years, but the topic of leadership has certainly been debated for much longer. After all, Machiavelli s *The Prince* is, for all practical purposes, a leadership handbook and it was written nearly 500 years ago.[1] It s fair to say that leadership has been discussed for a very long time in business and politics, as well as librarianship.

Library administrators are concerned with leadership because it is an integral part of library management. Faced with falling budgets, rapid technological change, an aging workforce, outdated organization charts and competition for our constituencies, leadership is more important in libraries than ever. Alarm bells about changing leadership needs were sounded in the literature nearly a decade ago,[2] but it is not clear anyone was listening.

The nature and role of library administrators has changed drastically over the past ten years. Organizations are restructuring, self-managed groups are performing more of the work, e-mail has replaced the printed memo in communication, and administrators are nding they no longer head hierarchies as organizations become atter. Through these changes, a new library leader is emerging. One with different talents and a more supportive mission. The need for a knowledge of budgeting, personnel management, fund raising, and other core activities remains, but is supplemented with an understanding of the special skills that leading in the new library organization requires.

Tom Wolfe, in his study of astronauts, called that special combination of knowledge, guts, fearlessness, determination, and perhaps a touch of bravado *The Right Stuff*.[3] With apologies to Wolfe, the following are attributes which might constitute the new library leader s right stuff.

Manages change

Librarians sometimes complain about the rapid technological changes we have had to confront over the past decade-and-a-half, but it isn t as though we re alone. Massive changes have swept through the healthcare, telecommunications, insurance, and advertising professions, among others. For most

About the author

Eric C. Shoaf is leader of preservation services at Brown University Library, e-mail: eric_shoaf@brown.edu

professions wracked by technological change, the past has been largely displaced. But the new library leader knows that change is good, understands it must be managed, and looks outside the profession for inspiration.

For example, an approach to behavioral change developed to help smokers quit the habit is quite useful in preparing staff for technological or organizational change,[4] yet has been largely ignored in the library world. The emphasis in this approach is on mentally preparing for change, then taking action, and nally maintenance. Interestingly, most of the focus is actually in the preparation stages rather than action. The new library leader must be committed to helping staff through the change process and as this involves much mental preparation, it requires a different set of leadership skills. It s part of the new library leader s right stuff.

Peter Drucker writes that we must become change leaders who shepherd institutions through tumultuous times by balancing change with continuity.[5] Library staff need continuity, and we have continuity with books and traditional services. New services haven t displaced the older building blocks of our profession as yet. But simple continuity cannot dispel the concern that remains.

The new library leader manages rather than imposes change on staff. He or she leads the staff through change with a combination of pliable adaptability, wisdom, and compassion. The leader with the right stuff understands that we must not only understand the nature of continuous change, but also be able to change with change.

Articulates a vision

Library leaders need a vision of the future. But more than that, they must be able to clearly communicate that vision to staff. Developing a vision is, in some ways, the easier part, though it requires a thorough knowledge of the larger mission of libraries and their place in the community or academic institution. Articulating and communicating that vision is at once more dif cult and more important. More dif cult because for others to understand and share the leader s vision, they must be able to internalize it and make it their own. This means that persuasion and an ability to impart beliefs and conviction is

a necessary component of the new library leader s right stuff, because for the leader s vision to be realized, library staff must be willing to move toward it with certainty and assurance certainty that it is the correct path and assurance that it will help achieve the library s goals.

Knows how to coach

There is some evidence that library leaders are learning how to coach. At the very least, they are learning to be facilitators and team players. But is that part of coaching? Tom Goldsmith is an executive coach who was pro led in the *New Yorker* magazine.[6] He discovered that one of the two main reasons people leave their jobs is that they hate their boss. One graduate-level course in library management does not a good boss make, yet this is sometimes the only formal training that library leaders get. John Lubans recently noted that the bad boss is alive and well in librarianship,[7] but even good bosses may not make good coaches.

Facilitating skills are part of the repertoire of the new library leader with the right stuff, and being a team player is important, as well. But coaching is more about instructing or imparting wisdom, and later prompting and helping others get the work done. It is about communicating and expediting rather than command and control; about recognizing talent and putting it to work where needed. In new library organizational structures, mid- and upper-level managers have inherited the role of coach without asking for it. Coaching is a skill that can be acquired through training. The library leader with the right stuff seeks opportunities to learn.

Lives the service ethic

Libraries have always been about service. Why is it, then, that our user surveys so often downgrade the level of service received? Perhaps it s time to re-emphasize positive customer interaction at the front-line service desks. Lots of libraries claim to have become more user focused, but more must be done.

Many senior library leaders got their start in the trenches shelving books, staf ng the reserve desk, or pasting in date-due slips. But when was the last time they did any of those tasks? The library leader is often far from the

front lines, yet makes decisions daily that directly affect front-line workers. There is much to be gained from standing in the shoes and getting inside the heads of employees trying to satisfy demanding customers.[8]

An old corporate trick is for a CEO to call on branches of his business while traveling. He doesn t identify himself but asks questions or tries to get a problem solved. Have you called your library s circulation desk to make inquiries? The results might surprise (or appall) you. The new library leader understands that a commitment to service must be a value held and practiced by everyone on the staff. It s part of the right stuff.

Puts people first

Planning often seems to be a library leader s *raison d'etre,* but a better approach is people rst, strategy second.[9] Strategic planning reports usually discuss organizational development, but frequently use arcane language that refer to staff in abstract terms. For the library leader, a people strategy is most important and should be a primary focus. It s the staff that answers reference questions, checks out materials, creates nding aids, processes new acquisitions, and reshelves the books.

Strategic plans chart a course for the organization, but they don t actually do any of the work. The library leader with the right stuff can t be sidetracked by strategic planning or implementation. While these are vitally important in managing the library, they are only working tools. The staff gives the library its character, and is the face that the public sees. If that isn t enough, recall that personnel costs represent the largest item in the budget by far. Finally, library staff, especially those who deal with the public, directly re ect how the library is managed.

The traditional management role of command and control is changing and some libraries are experimenting with organizational structures that are atter and place more emphasis on collaborative administration. As the library makes changes, the new library leader with the right stuff asks staff to help rather than impose change, and a leader listens to the staff s ideas. Staff feedback makes for better informed decisions. After all, front-line staff is the rst defense against declining customer satisfaction. Studies show that if the library staff is unhappy, then they won t be able to give good service.[10] The library leader with the right stuff knows the library is all about the people who work there.

Creates a culture of leadership

The library leader not only has to have the right stuff, he or she needs to be able to build these traits into library staff, as well. This isn t about delegating but rather is something altogether different. Ruth Simmons, president of Brown University, says A culture of leadership acknowledges the power of the individual within the organization. [W]e do not dictate so heavily to individuals the nature of their daily work. Instead, we construct an environment in which individuals at every level are free to some degree of interpretation and to some setting of standards and to some individuality of thought and practice. [11]

Does this nally mean goodbye to command and control? Not necessarily. But it does put the emphasis in a different place. If the library leader can t be on the front lines, who better to have there than staff operating in an environment of leadership, where they are free to interpret and respond to events rather than follow the rulebook.

Top-notch customer service is often about doing what it takes, at a speci c time and place, to meet and exceed the customer s expectations. This means staff who not only think outside the box, but also step outside the box in the name of service. In a culture of leadership, staff are empowered to take the extra steps and serve the customer.

Making the transition to the culture of leadership is perhaps the biggest obstacle for library leaders with the right stuff. They must trust in the instinct of staff to allow the degree of interpretation and the individuality of thought and practice that Simmons identi es. A culture of leadership can help staff to develop creative thinking and risk-taking actions, but requires a commitment from the top.

In writing about the government s planning process for the rst Gulf War, Bob Woodward notes that Mistakes were practically encouraged. Learning through failure became the unspoken motto. [12]

invitations to join. As of June 2004, more than 50 individuals chose to join the Blended Librarians Forum. Librarians interested in participating should contact either of the authors for additional information.

Conclusion

The blended librarian is an idea in its infancy. We have yet to fully understand its entire rami cation or the cascading consequences it may produce, either positive or negative. We believe we would be remiss if we failed to admit we are uncertain about its future growth as a concept that has meaning for all academic librarians. But we do believe that the time is ripe for action that lays the groundwork for deeper integration of our profession into the mainstream functions of higher education. We encourage all of our colleagues to work with us in shaping a learning community that will further de ne who the blended librarian is, and what he or she will ultimately contribute to his or her institution of higher education.

Notes

1. Outsell Inc. Outlook 2004: Issues In The Information Marketplace report dated December 19, 2003, www.outsellinc.com/sub-scribe/freebriefsOutlook.htm.

2. W. Lee Hisle, Top issues facing academic libraries: A report of the Focus on the Future Task Force, 63 *C&RL News*, no. 10, (November 2002): 714 715, 730. Also available at www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/crlnews/backissues2002/novmonth/topissuesfacing.htm. ■

A look at library management today shows that, unfortunately, most of us are not there yet. Our institutions are built on fairly rigid traditions and librarianship seems to attract the risk-averse. However, library leaders with the right stuff can and will shake off those old notions to create a culture of leadership which allows workers more control of their environment, creates a feedback mechanism from the front line, and helps ensure a more satis ed and productive staff. This in turn can lead to higher customer satisfaction.

The right stuff?

Some of our current library leaders have the right stuff. Middle managers, many of whom will become the library leaders of tomorrow, are developing those skills now. Much of their learning happens as organizations change, but much is also dependent on the willingness of emerging leaders to adopt a new leadership ethos. The attributes listed above, the right stuff for library leaders, are necessary skills for success in the evolving library organization.

Better managed libraries make libraries nicer places to work and provide better service to user constituencies. The new library leader with the right stuff will propel libraries into an uncertain future with grace and aplomb.

Notes

1. Machiavelli, *The Prince,* ed. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

2. Merrily Taylor, Getting It All Together: Leadership Requirements for the Future of Information Services *Journal of Library Administration* 20, no. 3/4: 9 24.

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5. Peter Drucker, Change Leaders, *Inc*. (June 1999): 65 72.

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8. Paul Hemp, My Week as a Room-Service Waiter at the Ritz *Harvard Business Review* 80, no. 6 (June 2002):50 57.

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10. Elizabeth Hawk and Garrett Sheridan, The Right Staff *Management Review* 88, no. 6 (June 1999): 43 48.

11. Ruth Simmons, Every Intellect is an Important One *George Street Journal* 26, no. 1 (August 31 September 6, 2001): 1 2.

12. Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (Simon & Schuster, 1991). ■