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Leadership... From A to Z

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LEADERSHIP... FROM A TO Z



Lessons learned from an academic law library director.
BY ANNE KLINEFELTER

Leadership strikes me as personal, contextual, and contingent—qualities that would preclude generalization. But I was honored and inspired by an invitation to speak on this topic, and I overcame my first instinct, which was to run in the opposite direction! Consequently, I have developed some A to Z leadership tips, which I have listed below, in hopes they will have broad applicability.

ABC: Always Be Collecting Ideas
Leaders respond to the insights of others to help create and nourish their own vision and strategies for implementation of that vision. Consultation with stakeholders can expand a set of options and reveal pitfalls to be avoided. Peers can also be important sources of ideas and expertise. Leaders often need only to show up and listen to gather insights, and the demonstrated intention to listen often helps build support along the way. Research is another helpful tool for

gathering ideas. Surveys, scholarship, and other more informal publications are terrific resources. Sometimes exploration into unfamiliar media and disciplines can offer applicable insights and ideas. This idea collection strategy requires looking beyond the filter bubbles of information normally assumed to be most relevant.

Once in the flow of ideas, leaders must test, reflect, and refine. A diversity of opinions can facilitate critical review of ideas, so checking in with others during the reflection process can be useful. After collecting ideas and using them to help shape your vision, a leader should give appropriate credit to acknowledge others' contributions and encourage further idea generation.

DEFGHI: Delegate Extensively For Greater Health of the Institution

Project management, problem solving, priority setting, and coaching others are all examples of responsibilities that leaders might delegate or share. Even without authority to assign responsibilities, a leader can explore ways to pull in useful collaborators. Sharing the workload helps make any of these types of leadership roles more sustainable. Delegating also encourages others to develop expertise and judgement. Leaders who remain accountable for decisions and projects must maintain communication to ensure the scope of delegation is clear, and to provide support when needed. Again, a leader should also give credit to those who take on delegated or shared responsibilities.

J: Juggle

Tools, even simple lists, are helpful, but they require constant updating in response to new developments. Keeping all the balls up in the air can be tricky, so leaders often hope that balls will bounce or be caught by someone else who can join the juggling. Prioritizing requires constant reordering to address changing circumstances.

KLMNO: Keep Long-, Mid-, and Near-Term Options in View

An important strategy for leaders is to cultivate both patience and opportunistic action. This strategy includes anticipating environmental changes and maintaining decision tree plans for multiple scenarios. Leaders need to cultivate resources even if they may take a while to come through. A related insight is that misfortune or disappointments may offer an unanticipated path for meeting goals that are on the wish list. Acceptance of change and new support for goals may be more forthcoming when some special circumstance upsets the normal order of things.

PQ: Practice Being Quiet

Sometimes ... leaders can learn a lot and avoid missteps by staying quiet.

R: Relationships

As fellow AALL member Joan Howland says, "relationships are everything." Don't wait until you need support. Cultivate trust. Demonstrate respect. Provide support whenever you can, both for the joy of it and because the effort usually finds some avenue for reciprocation. Remember that every interaction is about much more than the specific discussion.

STUV: Staff (and Supervisors) Need You to Translate for a Usable Vision

Communication is hard. Clear, measurable goals with deadlines can help communicate an otherwise vague vision into a plan of action. Ideally, individuals' goals should be a negotiated plan, updated regularly. While risks in some ambitious goals should be accommodated, rewards and accountability can grow from this kind of clear foundation. Similarly, leaders need to translate jargon and in-the-weeds issues for the non-expert who oversees the broader institution. Synthesis and simplification are important, as is the ability to place the library's priorities within the agenda and language of the broader institution.

WX: Win Support with Examples

Rarely do stakeholders grasp the impact of abstract goals. Efficiency. Innovation. Service. Those banners pale in comparison with a story of how Tiffany stepped up to manage library HR when the school had a vacancy, or how Nicole transformed the Prep for Practice program with technology classes that drew high student attendance. Or how Aaron developed the faculty scholarship repository yielding hundreds of downloads for Professor W's new article. Or how Jesse worked with LeTroy to manage stack storage and shifts during renovation, leading professor C to cheer the organization on for restored access. Examples can also be negative; for example, how professor R wanted access to an unavailable database for her research, or how an oversubscribed Advanced Legal Research class was cancelled when a reference librarian vacancy was not filled.

YZ: Say Yes to Zany Invitations

Like speaking about leadership and then writing about it. Opportunities may not always come when you are prepared for them. Being open to the unexpected helps us not only grow as people, but also as professionals and leaders.

After A-Z, it's up to U

I hope this brief A to Z guide has given you new insights about leadership and inspired you to apply some of its principles to your own leadership activities.

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