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Chapter 3

LEADERSHIP BEGINS WITH YOU

Shannon D. Jones

MY LOVE OF libraries and learning was nurtured by my grandmother, who was born on a farm and had a seventh-grade education. My grandmother was born in 1913 during a period when African Americans were not allowed to pursue an education and their career options were limited. As a result, she had an insatiable desire to see all of her grandchildren get an education and do well in life. For her, the key to success was to harness those things that were rightfully yours regardless of your socioeconomic status. No one could take away your ability to pursue an education, a love for reading, or the right to use a library. My grandmother bought me my first book and instilled in me a love of reading. She encouraged me to not take people at face value. As she used to say, “You are smart enough to look for your own answers and make your decisions based on what you have learned.” During her formidable years, my grandmother was told that the best way to keep information from someone, in her case from a black person, was to put it in a book. I have held those words close to my heart since I was a child. In fact, those words first inspired me to pursue a career as a librarian.

My mother also influenced my decision to become a librarian. She instilled in me the importance of not comparing myself to others. In her

words, “You are not them. You are YOU!” She taught me to have an unwavering confidence in my ability to do anything that I wanted to do and to pursue my goals relentlessly regardless of what other people thought or said. One of the many invaluable life lessons she stressed to me was that I had to live with the consequences of the decisions I made. She instilled in me the importance of seeking advice as necessary, but I should make decisions for myself, especially about those things that would have long-lasting implications.

Both of these beautiful women left traditions and legacies that I carry with me always. I’ve incorporated everything that I learned from my mother and grandmother into my own identity as a woman, a librarian, and a leader. From this context, I offer what I consider to be best practices for bringing out the leader in you and being the best librarian possible.

I pursued librarianship with the overarching goal of becoming the best librarian I could be. In my mind, the fact that I am African American should not make a difference in whether I’m successful or not, though it might make my journey to becoming the best a little harder. Indeed, the occasional struggle or setback, once overcome, has made me a better person and librarian. As a first-generation college student, I entered the profession understanding that being mediocre was not an option. I knew that I needed a plan, the wherewithal to execute that plan, and the confidence to walk in my success. I also understood that on my journey, I would meet people who could help me along the way, and I had to be smart enough to recognize and accept help. Knowing that I am now in the position to offer help to others, I offer the following strategies for developing a career in librarianship and negotiating the world of leadership.

DEFINE AND PURSUE A LEADERSHIP VISION

As you begin to think about becoming a leader in our profession, you should consider several things: Leadership begins with you. In fact, all leadership begins with self-leadership. In Peter Drucker’s article “Managing Oneself,” he stated that you cannot begin to lead other people if you are not leading yourself effectively.¹ Essentially you have to decide what type of leader you want to be. The best way to do this is by defining and pursuing a leadership vision for yourself. As with any goal, you must con-

ceive the vision before you can achieve the vision. Take time to reflect on your personal leadership vision by asking the following questions: What do you want to achieve in your career? Where do you want to be in five to ten years? What are you willing to sacrifice to reach your goals? What values are central to you and to who you are? These questions will help you do several things: (1) define your vision, (2) develop the vision, (3) defend and communicate the vision, and (4) demonstrate the vision.

Lee and King also suggested that you should develop a personal and a leadership vision. The personal vision should do three things: incorporate your dreams and passions, be authentic and true to your realities, and evolve continually.² They also noted, “Your leadership vision needs to be grounded in your personal vision. Your personal vision serves your leadership vision in a very important way: it lets you know what leadership roles to accept or decline, seek or avoid.”³ To help you clarify your personal vision, Lee and King suggested that you “look at yourself in one or more of the following ways: tell your own story, reflect on your day-dreams, look for patterns in events, behaviors, focus, and energy, take lessons from role models, assess how you feel about power, assess your responses to conflict, note your creative environment, and follow your intuition.”⁴

Once you establish your leadership vision, you must then set realistic priorities to help you move strategically toward your vision. Seek out those people and programs that may help you along the way. As you develop your vision, you should also read the library literature, as well as that of other disciplines, such as business and education. What skills and attributes does library literature suggest are core competencies for library leaders? You will find that you may already have some of the required skills.

CREATE YOUR OWN CAREER ROAD MAP

One of the lessons that I learned in grade school is that proper planning prevents poor preparation. In a nutshell, being successful in this profession requires that you be intentional and willing to invest in your own development. Your willingness to invest the time, energy, and attention in crafting a successful career in librarianship depends on you. You have to take ownership of your own development.

Year after year, libraries and other organizations develop strategic plans to serve as a road map for where they are going in the future. These plans set goals and identify specific actions to achieve those goals. As librarians, we should undergo the same process for developing our careers; we should each have a personal strategic plan for our careers. Achieving excellence and being the best at anything takes planning, preparation, and persistence. We must be intentional and willing to invest in our own development. My success as a librarian did not happen overnight; it is the result of having a laser-focused plan, well-thought-out decisions and follow-through. Every development opportunity I've completed, advanced degree I've earned, leadership institute or program I've attended, coupled with the practical experience that I've gained has been strategically selected to advance me toward my goals.

One strategy that works for me is to identify long- and short-term goals for myself. I tend to plan my life out in three-year intervals. Career planning or development is similar to website development. One of the things that we often hear about websites is that they are works in progress, always under construction. I like to apply this analogy to career development. You are a work in progress and, as such, you should always be thinking of ways to improve your skill set, enhance your marketability, and improve your brand. The best way that I've found to do this is to develop a strategic plan for your career. It will serve as your plan of action for achieving your professional goals.

One of the first questions often asked in strategic planning meetings is, "What's our brand?" A librarian, then, might ask herself the same question: What is my skill set? How am I unique? How might those skills and talents drive the direction of my career? Once you answer these questions, you can identify your long- and short-term goals. This strategy of setting long- and short-term goals has been key to my success.

A key question to ask as you begin to plan your career goals is what it is you need to achieve your long-term goals. As Revelle noted, "If you have a long-term career goal, you must prepare yourself to reach that goal through a combination of education, experience and networking."⁵ For example, when I decided that my long-term goal was to become a library director, I set a series of short-term goals that would move me toward that larger goal. First, I began to study librarians who held

directorships at that time. I reviewed their credentials, explored professional development opportunities, observed my library directors at work, and got to know several directors. These steps helped me better understand the types of goals I needed to set. I also did a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis to identify my strengths and weaknesses. According to Hansen and Hansen, a SWOT analysis focuses on the “internal and external environments, examining strengths and weaknesses in the internal environment and opportunities and threats in the external environment.”⁶ They suggested that you “examine your current situation by asking the following: What are your strengths and weaknesses? How can you capitalize on your strengths and overcome your weaknesses? What are the external opportunities and threats in your chosen career field?”⁷ By identifying these characteristics, I was able to better understand not only who I was but how I could predict the barriers I would face and develop strategies to overcome them.

In the previous paragraph, I encouraged you to set long-term goals for your career. Setting short-term goals is equally important. For example, once I achieved my goal of becoming a library director, I set several short-term goals that I believed would help me to be successful during my first year. Examples of short-term goals I set for myself include shadowing three directors in my first year, identifying and completing a leadership development opportunity for new leaders or library directors, attending a fund-raising conference, and exercising three times a week. Setting short-term goals will allow you to reach small, impactful milestones as you work toward your long-term goals. More importantly, reaching milestones builds confidence.

In 2005, I had the opportunity to participate in the Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians from Traditionally Underrepresented Groups. One of our assigned readings was Peter Drucker’s article “Managing Oneself.” In the article, Drucker stated, “We must each be our own chief executive officer. He says “it’s up to you to carve out your place in the work world and know when to change course.”⁸ The key takeaway from this article is, “All leadership begins with self-leadership.”⁹ You cannot begin to lead others if you have not mastered the art of leading yourself. The idea of carving out my own future resonated with me and has stuck with me ever since.

GET A MENTOR

At the 2015 Midwinter Meeting of the American Library Association, I had the opportunity to have an informal conversation with the university librarian from one of my previous libraries. As we rode the shuttle to the convention center, I thanked him for helping to nurture and advance my career over the previous ten years. I also shared with him how much I appreciated the opportunity to observe and learn from him. I realized that much of the knowledge and many of the skills I use in my current position I learned from watching him lead our library system. For me, he was an unacknowledged role model. I characterize this librarian as an “unacknowledged” role model because, until that conversation at Midwinter, I had never expressed to him my appreciation for him being an excellent leader. I appreciated his business acumen, his professionalism, and his overall approach to leadership. I have many mentors, and they are all impactful in my development in some way. I encourage you to look around the profession. There are numerous leaders in librarianship. Before seeking out a mentor, set clear goals of what you would like to get out of the relationship. You want to be mentored by someone who will give you honest, authentic feedback about ideas and strategies.

As you progress in your career, you will find that you have different mentors for different purposes. In addition, depending on the nature of the goal that you set with your mentor, your interaction with that person may be long- or short-term. Some mentoring relationships naturally happen over time, while others are part of formal leadership programs. While there are benefits to formal mentoring, the literature suggests that “informal mentoring provides opportunities for a personalized approach, yet maintains enough flexibility to prevent participants from viewing the process as rigid or stagnant.”¹⁰ I have found this to be true in my own mentoring relationships.

Additional benefits of having a mentor include “receiving both help and direction from the mentor in a collaborative manner.”¹¹ For example, as a new librarian, I had a seasoned librarian take me under her wing, helping me navigate the complex university landscape and learn the ropes. This was extremely important for me as a new librarian and as a minority. Essentially, she assisted me with swimming rather than watching me sink. As a minority librarian, I always have a subconscious feeling that all eyes are on me, especially in situations where I am the sole minority in a lead-

ership role. In fact, it is not uncommon to feel as if you have to be smarter and work harder than everyone in the room to be taken seriously and to prove that you have what it takes to do the job effectively. It is especially important that minority librarians seek out mentors. Research indicates “that librarians of color often feel isolated, intimidated, and alienated due to joining a predominantly white profession where others may be older and have more job-related experience.”¹² Ross suggested that the benefits of mentoring minorities include “instilling confidence and providing minorities with a set of skills with which they can compete in a high-pressure workplace. These skills might include publication and presentation advice or more practical skills that allow minority librarians a better understanding of the politics and environment of an academic organization.”¹³ Overall, mentoring is important for your professional development. As you benefit from your mentor’s guidance, you are also preparing to become a mentor to those who will need your guidance in the future.

PRACTICE SELF-REFLECTION

A key concept that I learned and practiced while working on my master’s in education was the importance of self-reflection as a learning process. The impact of reflection during my graduate studies was so influential that I continue to use it as a key aspect of my professional practice. Self-reflection has ultimately made me a stronger leader. As a leader, I have learned to be both thoughtful and intentional about the decisions I make and the projects that I take on. Murdoch-Eaton and Sandars wrote that “reflection is an essential aspect of all of our lives. We have an experience, we think about why we reacted in a certain way and we then consider whether we need to take action and alter our response to similar experiences in the future.”¹⁴ I have found this advice to be true.

For example, as a manager it is my goal to make well-thought-out decisions with the library’s best interest in mind. Sometimes I get this right, but then there are those times when the unexpected happens and no matter what I have done the outcome could not have been improved. At these times, reflection is the most important. Each and every time I make a decision that does not yield the desired outcome, I retreat to my quiet place and ask myself the following questions: (1) What could I have done differently to change the outcome? (2) If given an oppor-

tunity for a do-over, would I actually do something different? (3) What are my lessons learned? and (4) Did the world end? If the world didn't end as a result of my decision, I normally take my lessons learned and move on. I have found this process to be particularly helpful when having difficult conversations. Roberts and Westville noted that "one cannot possibly study ahead of time how to handle every situation that may present itself, but one can develop a process of learning from experience that ensures progressive competency development over time."¹⁵ While there are many benefits to self-reflection, the major benefit acknowledged by Murdoch-Eaton and Sandars is that reflection is "a deliberate process of thinking about a typical complex experience after the event [that] has the potential to improve intuitive professional decision making."¹⁶

As Plack and colleagues noted, "Reflection, as a method of learning from experience, has been widely accepted in various domains of professional education."¹⁷ I believe this is true of librarianship as well, so I encourage you to make self-reflection a part of your professional practice. You might use several strategies to incorporate reflection into your professional practice. For example, you may find it helpful to write your thoughts in a journal or engage in dialogue with a trusted colleague, mentor, or friend. I tend to use a combination of the two, as both have their benefits. Sharing your reflection via dialogue will allow you to "hear an alternate perspective, challenge you to think critically, and to develop collaborative reflective skills necessary for participation in learning organizations."¹⁸ Alternatively, writing your reflections in a journal will allow you to review your reflection at a later date to see how your thoughts and behaviors have evolved over time.

BE AN AGENT OF CHANGE

One of my favorite quotes from Mahatma Gandhi is, "Be the change you want to see in the world." Gandhi knew that a change agent must model the behavior that she wants to see from those impacted by the change. By modeling inspirational behavior, the change agent gains influence because people respect a leader who does more than give lip service to a given change.

A change agent knows that change is constant and a leader can either lead that change or be left behind. Throughout my lifetime, I've dealt with

a variety of change initiatives that have impacted not only how I accomplish tasks personally and professionally, but also how I respond. From these experiences, I've learned that change is not only constant, but that it comes in many shapes and forms: change can be planned, but oftentimes it's unanticipated; people accept change at different rates; people will either embrace change or resist it at all costs; growth cannot happen without change; and not all change is bad. It has been in moments of immense and often intense change that I've found my voice, pursued a passion, fulfilled a dream, or discovered a talent.

Finally, as you deal with change in your career, I recommend having your own method for deciding when to fight or embrace a change. One thing that has kept me grounded has been Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer," which reads, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." I've said this prayer on countless occasions at work and at home. It helps me to focus my energies and attentions in the right direction and on the right priorities. The prayer reminds me that as a change agent, my goal is to focus my energies on impacting those things that are within my power to control. More importantly, it helps me to achieve a peaceful mind-set in the face of adversity, turmoil, chaos, and uncertainty. I encourage you to find your serenity.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR MIND AND BODY

I liken the responsibilities of being a leader to those of a caregiver. As leader you will spend a tremendous amount of time caring for the interests of the library and your staff. You can perhaps do this best by doing what the old adage says and trying to put yourself in their shoes. However, in order to be most effective at giving care, a leader must also ensure that she is getting adequate self-care. I learned the value of caring for your mind and body after my first week as a new library director. At the conclusion of my first week in my new position, I found myself mentally and physically tired, exhausted in fact. I learned immediately that to do this job effectively would require an increased level of physical and mental stamina. As I reflected on my first week, I realized that my schedule was stacked so tightly that I had meetings scheduled through my normal lunchtime hour. My advice to you is to be intentional about planning time away from

work to allow yourself time to reset. For me, this meant that I needed to make sure that I allocated time to take lunch every day or to get out of the library and walk around campus. Bolman and Gallos offered five steps for being a healthy academic leader, arguing that

healthy leaders care for self and build vitality by attending to boundaries, biology, balance, beauty, and bounce:

Boundaries—Distinguish between their own business and the baggage and work of others, **Biology**—Remaining vigilant to boundary management takes concentration and stamina that are strengthened by conscious attention to self-care and good health; **Balance**—retaining one’s equilibrium and perspective in the face of challenge or frustration; **Beauty**—Identify activities and events that feed the soul, and **Bounce**—the ability to adapt and strengthen in the face of challenge, trauma, or stress.¹⁹

Successful leadership should not come at the expense of your physical or mental health. You will not be able to lead people toward your vision if you are not able to physically or mentally withstand the pressures of your leadership role. Do what you can to take care of yourself. I have found that the fastest road to burnout is to neglect your own well-being.

CONCLUSION

Being successful as a library leader requires that you take intentional steps towards achieving your leadership goals. In this chapter, I offered several strategies that have worked for me, including encouraging you to define and pursue a leadership vision; creating a road map to chart your leadership path; getting a mentor whom you can consult for advice; practicing self-reflection so that you learn from your experiences, good or bad; being a change agent; and taking care of your mind and body so that you don’t lose yourself in the work. These strategies have helped me build a foundation for greatness. I hope you will use these same strategies to propel you forward in your leadership endeavors.

NOTES

1. Peter Drucker, "Managing Oneself," *Harvard Business Review* 83, no. 1 (2005): 100–9.
2. Robert J. Lee and Sara N. King, *Discovering the Leader in You* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).
3. *Ibid.*, 34. Center for Academic Excellence and The Writing Center.
4. *Ibid.*, 37.
5. Jack B. Reville, "Call a SPADE a SPADE," *Quality Progress* 44, no. 3 (2011): 54.
6. Randall S. Hansen and Katharine Hansen, "Using a SWOT Analysis in Your Career Planning," *Quintessential Careers QuintZine* 1, no. 16 (October 9, 2000), <https://www.livecareer.com/quintessential/swot-analysis>.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Drucker, "Managing Oneself," 1.
9. *Ibid.* 1.
10. Kevin M. Ross, "Purposeful Mentoring in Academic Libraries," *Journal of Library Administration* 53, no. 7–8 (2013): 416.
11. *Ibid.*, 417.
12. *Ibid.*, 418.
13. *Ibid.*, 418.
14. Deborah Murdoch-Eaton and John Sandars, "Reflection: Moving from a Mandatory Ritual to Meaningful Professional Development," *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 99, no. 3 (2014): 279.
15. Cynthia Roberts and I. N. Westville, "Developing Future Leaders: The Role of Reflection in the Classroom," *Journal of Leadership Education* 7, no. 1 (2008): 117.
16. Murdoch-Eaton and Sandars, "Reflection," 279.
17. Margaret M. Plack, Maryanne Driscoll, Sylvene Blissett, Raymond McKenna, and Thomas P. Plack, "A Method for Assessing Reflective Journal Writing," *Journal of Allied Health* 34, no. 4 (2005): 199.
18. Roberts and Westville, "Developing Future Leaders," 121.
19. Lee G. Bolman and Joan V. Gallos, *Reframing Academic Leadership* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2010), 191–197.

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