

Engaging in Informal Leadership: Benefits, Challenges, and Strategies

A Knowledge Share Session

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Handout

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Link to Presentation Materials: <http://tiny.cc/engaginginil>

Our Stories

I (Linda) began my career taking on various roles in a small special library, part of an organization that was intentionally structured to provide leadership mentoring. In this context I discovered an affinity for project management and team leadership, setting a pattern that I have followed ever since: working to identify opportunities. I have scanned my institution for challenges to tackle, or simply encountered problems that needed addressing. I have screwed up my courage to ask for leeway to take on important work, or I have dived in headfirst without even asking. I have both worked too hard and acquired a mountain of valuable skills and knowledge. I have made new connections (inside my institution and far beyond), built relationships, and learned so much about how to make collaboration work and how to inspire others to take action. Five years ago, I joined the faculty of a small academic library with a flat structure, where I found all of the formal leadership positions already filled. So, what is a librarian to do? I created my own leadership opportunity, developing what I call the “Teamwork Project,” designed to cut across the silos in the department and draw more of my colleagues into engagement with new initiatives. I have enjoyed many benefits from my IL experiences, particularly in gaining expertise, perspective, confidence, autonomy, and a creative outlet. You might call me an “evangelist” for IL, a true believer.

I (Susanne) am a department head and an assistant director of the library at a small private college—my first official management position. But, before getting this position, and contributing to the reasons why I got this position, I had a long history of IL. When I began my career, I could not imagine ever desiring a management or directorship position. I wanted to just do the work of librarianship, to be on the front lines, to perfect my craft. Along the way, however, I was encouraged by a supervisor to seek out professional development opportunities, to become involved in professional organizations, to identify and solve problems, and to collaborate with colleagues in other libraries and departments—in other words, to spread my wings and test my abilities. I did not know at the time how precious this “push” was, and I also understand that this is a privilege not provided to everyone. With the support of colleagues, I was able to informally take on leadership roles, to volunteer for committees and boards, to work on things that motivated me, to learn new skills, to help influence others in positive ways, to get out of my comfort zone and put myself out there, and to eventually, and confidently, climb the next rung of my ladder. As someone who has led in different capacities over the years, both informally and formally, I understand and appreciate the complexities and nuances of IL and its critical role in shaping one’s career.

Miles, L. & Markgren, S. (2023, forthcoming). Taking advantage of opportunities for informal leadership. In B. West & E. Galoozis (Eds.), *Thriving as a mid-career librarian: Identity, advocacy, and pathways*. ACRL Publications.

What's your level of IL experience?

Rate your experience with Informal Leadership on a scale of 1 to 4

1 = I am interested in IL, but have no experience

2 = I have a little experience (e.g., project management, etc.)

3 = I have done this more than once

4 = I have garnered a great deal of experience with IL

Ready...set...

Pick up a card from the table based on the experience rating you gave yourself – hold it high!

If you are a 1 or 2 → pick up an Blue card

If you are a 3 or 4 → pick up an Yellow card

Gather at tables, ensuring that there are both less experienced participants (Blue cards) and more experienced participants (Yellow cards) at each table.

Knowledge Share

Discuss the following prompts

Assign some folks to take notes on the note cards provided → we will collect these and post all the notes to the shared folder

1. Are there opportunities for IL in your library/department that you might not be cognizant of? (e.g., possibilities for interdepartmental collaboration, problems that may need addressing, etc.)
2. What skills or strategies contribute to successful IL? (and how can these be developed?)
3. What are the relationship challenges that can come up in IL situations? (and what strategies can help?)
4. What strategies can help informal leaders avoid burnout in IL situations?

Workshop

Goal: To begin to develop a plan for your first Knowledge Share Session

1. **Imagine:** Think of a topic for professional development that would serve your library and your colleagues.
2. **Table Talk:** What are the logistics for setting up a Knowledge Share session? Think specifically about the PD topic you have chosen and get feedback from your table mates.
3. **Journaling:** What are the PROMPTS you will give your participants to bring out their experiences and questions for the Knowledge Share?