

Lifecycle of Library Leadership

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Column Editor's Note. *Mentoring is an important responsibility of leaders but we seldom know the impact of mentoring on individuals. This article provides insight into how a leader can assist librarians and library workers in developing their skills. The result is that we have a stronger profession with requisite skills for librarians to be successful. Interested authors are invited to submit articles for this column to the editor at farrell@uwyo.edu.*

MENTORING TO GROW LIBRARY LEADERS

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INTRODUCTION TO COLUMN

I recently read a column by Suzanne Sears, Chair of ALA's Government Documents Roundtable in a recent issue of DttP (Documents to the People) in which Suzanne described the impact of mentoring on her career (Sears, 2013). It occurred to me that although we encourage leaders to mentor and coach librarians and library workers, we seldom know how mentoring impacts an individual. Suzanne graciously agreed to share her experiences in this column. As you read about the impact that leaders have had on her professional career, it might help you to consider how to devote time to coaching someone. As leaders, we have a responsibility to grow and develop our profession. There are many ways we leave a lasting impact on librarianship and our organizations and mentoring is a significant activity that will influence our profession for years to come.

For leaders and managers, mentoring might fit within a succession plan for an organization. Roma Harris argues though that mentoring might not be optimal if select individuals are provided opportunities that are not available to an entire organization (Harris, 1993). A leader should be cautious that mentoring within an organization is not considered to be a club but that opportunities for personal and professional growth are available to all employees who wish to advance their careers. With that caution, formal mentoring programs within an organization can enhance skills and prepare employees to take on leadership responsibilities. These might include chairing a committee or workgroup, overseeing a project, leading a team, and supervising students or volunteers. The mentoring program may extend to other units within an organization – for instance an employee might work in another city office for a specific time period to develop managerial and/or leadership skills. Formal mentoring within a library will assist with employee development as well as building leadership skills that will support career progression of librarians and library workers. The negative aspect of a formal development program is that individuals may be anxious to advance their careers and there is no guarantee that a succession plan will result in future

promotions. This might be frustrating to the individual and I have seen managers discouraged after investing in an individual when that individual leaves the organization. This is a short term loss though. It is our responsibility as leaders to continually invest in our most important resource – employees. As librarians and library workers advance in their careers, it is a positive reflection on their organization and they will contribute to the broader profession.

Mentoring is especially effective in the retention of minority librarians and contributes to a diverse profession. As libraries consider how to attract and retain librarians and library workers, mentoring should be a component of the program. Moore, Miller, Pitchford, and Jeng noted that:

Barriers to advancement, such as racism and sexism, can occasionally be overcome with the help of a mentor through a better understanding of traditional organizational culture and how to navigate it early on in a professional career. The experiences of librarians of color are unique, and through collaboration with a mentor, the profession can be transformed into one that reflects the true diversity of the communities that libraries serve. (2008, p. 80)

Formal and informal mentoring strategies should be considered within broader organizational human resources plans. While employers benefit from mentoring programs, professional organizations also support and strengthen their membership through formal mentoring and activities that encourage informal mentoring. Suzanne notes below how her involvement in professional associations benefited her development and that she seeks opportunities to pay it forward.

Suzanne is just one example of how mentoring contributed to her leadership development and most of us can point to an individual or individuals who took time to coach our development. Consider how you might seek a mentoring relationship to assist you in your leadership growth or how you might formally or informally contribute to the future of our profession by investing within the next generation of leaders. It will be a lasting legacy.

– Maggie Farrell

INTRODUCTION TO MENTORING

When Maggie Farrell approached me about writing a column on mentoring I was excited for the opportunity to discuss a topic that I am passionate about. I feel that mentoring within an institution is essential to maintaining strong leadership and continuity. Mentoring is also essential for growing professional leaders in library organizations. If you ask most seasoned librarians, they will tell you how important at least one person was in helping them to develop their skill set. The majority will have more than one. Mentors have been instrumental in helping my career blossom. I have been extremely fortunate to have several individuals take the time to invest in my future. My mentors have advised me on how to navigate the politics of a university environment, network among peers, and develop my management and leadership skills. They have provided me with encouragement, building my confidence and self-esteem.

I find being a mentor to be one of the most rewarding parts of my job as an administrator. Fostering a love for librarianship among new students, encouraging new librarians to develop their scholarly and

professional careers, and guiding new managers into future leaders gives me a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment and a renewed sense of purpose. Many times the daily tasks of administration can frustrate me and mentoring helps rekindle in me the passion I have for librarianship and connecting individuals with information that will help make a difference in their lives.

I believe that mentoring is an essential component in developing supervisors, managers, and administrators within an organization. Librarians are often asked to take on larger or more challenging roles with very little preparation or support. Mentoring is an essential component in helping them to be successful in these new positions. Succession planning is a hot topic among library administrators facing a shortage of qualified candidates to replace planned or unplanned losses key leaders. Effective mentoring programs can help develop the potential of current employees and increase the size of the pool of candidates for promotion.

By establishing formal mentoring programs or supporting informal mentoring opportunities, organizations can reap benefits such as a higher level of employee retention and more efficient onboarding of new employees (Lee, 2011). Mentoring can also help individuals serving as mentors view the organization with fresh eyes regarding its functions, politics, and culture. Mentoring gives less experienced employees valuable feedback, insight, and support. It also allows individuals within an organization to pass along valuable wisdom and institutional knowledge from generation to generation.

BECOMING A MENTOR

By definition, a mentor is someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person (Mentor, Webster). In the current culture of individuals changing careers late in life, mentorship is not always from an older to a younger person. In fact, when it comes to social media, many of the younger less experienced librarians can serve as mentors to those who struggle navigating this and other new technologies. The truth is that people at every stage of their career benefit from the kind of assistance mentors offer. Mentoring is about supporting the individual you are working with, listening to them, building self-confidence, and encouraging new ideas and effective leadership practices.

Mentoring can be a long-term or short-term arrangement. It can be a formal or informal arrangement. It can involve a supervisor and their direct report, a co-worker, a colleague, a student, or someone you met at a conference. The main commodity you need to have as a mentor is knowledge that can move a mentee to his or her next expected level and the desire to pass that knowledge along to others (Todaro, 2011).

Some individuals may not even realize that they are serving as mentors. It may be part of their daily routine. This can be especially true between a supervisor and their direct report. Supervisors advising on how to handle certain situations can help individuals develop diplomacy skills needed to advance their career. Just by observing mentors on a daily basis, mentees can pick up on many things. Beliefs, attitudes, style, ethics, methods, procedures, and standards can all be learned through observation of an individual without their knowledge.

The important thing to remember about mentors is that they are still developing in their career as well and need mentors too. The mentoring relationship is about imparting knowledge from one individual to another to help them reach their career goals and beyond. Both the mentor and the mentee benefit from successful mentoring relationships. Not all mentoring relationships are successful. Differences in communication and learning styles can sometimes make it difficult to form a trusted partnership necessary for success.

FORMAL MENTORING PROGRAMS

Formal mentoring opportunities exist in many national and state library organizations. Librarians can apply to be a mentor or a mentee. Some of these programs are short-term commitments with minimal expectations like pairing up a new conference attendee with someone who has attended that conference many times to help show the first time attendee how to get the most out of the conference programs and exhibits. Others can require a great deal of focus, hard work, and time. Usually, the programs will have clearly defined expectations for the mentor, so that prospective volunteers will be able to determine if they have the desired expertise and the time to commit to the program.

Many libraries also have formal mentoring programs within their organization. As I mentioned above, mentoring potential supervisors and managers to increase their knowledge of management techniques can be beneficial to organizations. Developing management and leadership skills among potential managers is a good way to increase the pool of candidates when administrative jobs open up. This can be done through formal programs that provide training workshops or by job shadowing. Other formal mentoring programs involve pairing up new hires with veteran employees to help them learn organizational policies and culture. This kind of pairing often leads to improved job performance and high morale. It can help establish friendships among co-workers and minimize the time it takes for a new hire to feel a part of the team. This can lead to happier more productive employees and higher employee retention. Not only does the new librarian become acclimated to the work environment sooner, but the mentor becomes invested in that employee and their success at the organization.

Academic libraries often provide mentors to new librarians to help them navigate the promotion and tenure process. This can be done by providing workshops on how to get published, creating opportunities for practice sessions on upcoming presentations, providing guidance on the promotion and tenure procedures and expectations, and/or establishing a group of published librarians to review a co-worker's article before they submit it to a peer reviewed journal for publication. These kinds of programs can increase the chances that librarians going up for promotion and tenure are successful.

Many libraries have formal mentoring programs involving library school students working as interns or as graduate assistants. Some public libraries have mentoring programs for volunteers. These formal programs usually center on training for specific duties. As budgets get tighter, staffing decreases, and needs for new services evolve, libraries are no longer using volunteers and interns for simple tasks such as filing. Many libraries are developing the skill set of these individuals to help cover the service desks and answer email reference questions. Graduate assistants in the Research and Instructional Services Department at my library attend a monthly meeting for training. Some of these meetings are set up as

open discussions with members of the administration to provide guidance on job seeking tips and real world situations not taught in typical library school programs.

Informal opportunities to be a mentor are many. When attending conferences, seek out first time attendees and invite them to dinner, introduce them to others and encourage them to maintain contact with you through the year if they have questions. Offer to co-author or co-present with new librarians who might be apprehensive about publishing or presenting. If you receive information on calls for proposals or papers, forward to library employees.

For me personally, I find the informal mentoring to be the most rewarding and the easiest to fit into my busy schedule. For some of my newer managers, I have found job shadowing to an effective tool in developing their skill sets and preparing them for the future and possible promotion into leadership roles. Allowing them to sit beside me while I decide how to allocate travel budgets for the year helps them to understand the process more fully. They gain knowledge on budgeting as well as a more comprehensive understanding of the tough choices that have to be made when dividing up resources. Additional benefits are a more transparent process and improved communication. This leads to more buy-in to the decisions and less negativity among the faculty and staff regarding the distribution of resources.

I also use informal mentoring to help employees navigate and understand organizational politics within the library, the university, and at the state and national levels of government. As a former government documents librarian, I have a wealth of knowledge on the inner workings of the legislative bodies in particular. This knowledge includes how to track legislation that will affect the governance of higher education and libraries. Whether it is politics at the national and state level or politics among the library administrative leaders, this is valuable knowledge to pass along to those striving to further their careers from managers to leaders.

Working in an academic library allows me many opportunities to mentor library school students, as well as students who show an interest in pursuing a master's degree in library science. I try to always make myself available to students who are given class assignments to interview library faculty and administrators. After the interviews I make sure they know that they are welcome to contact me in the future if they have questions regarding the profession. Many times I have been taken up on that offer. I make myself available to help library school students and recent graduates with their job application materials and to discuss the job interview process. With my background in working in public libraries, I often find myself having conversations with students about the difference between public libraries and academic libraries and which would be a better fit with their goals and aspirations. I encourage library employees and students to contact me for an appointment if they wish to discuss anything from career aspirations to tips on interviewing.

I also find many opportunities to mentor librarians outside of my organization, developing friendships over time, offering occasional advice on career goals or professional service opportunities. I have been known to strike up a conversation on a shuttle bus at ALA, exchange business cards, and continue to provide advice ten years later via occasional emails. It is extremely satisfying to watch the careers flourish of librarians that I have had a chance to work with and advise.

Sometimes all it takes is a vote of confidence from a colleague to encourage someone to run for a committee position in ALA or submit an article for publication. They may doubt that they have enough expertise to contribute. Other times they need help taking the first step toward networking. Opening doors by introducing new faces to veteran librarians can help them gain meaningful visibility and create new opportunities for them to further their careers.

IMPACT OF MENTORING

I mentioned before what a tremendous impact mentors have had on my career. Were it not for mentors, I would have never become a librarian. I was fortunate enough to have a co-worker notice the enthusiasm I had for government documents and helping patrons connect with information. She encouraged me to go to library school and further guided me to become a documents librarians and helped me transition into my first full-time job. All of this was done informally over a period of twelve years. She became a trusted friend and confidant whom I relied on to give me sound advice. She took the time to develop a rapport with me and I respected her judgment. She mentored me by modeling for me the importance of being a documents librarian and by encouraging me every step of the way to pursue my passion and interests.

I also have mentors from outside my library, individuals who took an interest in me and made time to help me make connections with influential people in my field. Some of these relationships were formal to begin with, but quickly developed into long term friendships. They helped guide me into taking a more active role in professional organizations and scholarly works. They have helped me to develop basic skills for librarians like outreach and instruction as well as managerial and leadership skills. They helped me make the transition from public libraries to academic libraries. Because of their continued guidance, encouragement, and advocacy on my behalf, I have been able to accomplish my original goals as a documents librarian and move on to new goals for library administration. The great thing is that they are still a big part of my trusted network of advisors and I continue to gain from their willingness to invest time in me.

My own experience has made me a believer in the power of mentoring on an individual and an organization. I can never thank the people who have mentored me and continue to mentor me enough with words. I think that the best way to show them how much I appreciate all they have done for me is to take every opportunity to pay their efforts forward by investing my time in others. Seeking out opportunities to be a mentor allows me to continue their legacy and rewards me with joy at watching individuals I have mentored succeed in their careers. I have gotten to the point in my career where some of my mentees have become mentors and it is exhilarating to watch the process unfold and continue to build new leaders for our library and the profession.

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