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Riding the Wave

PROFILES OF AN EMERGING LIBRARY LEADERSHIP



Changing Gears, Facing Fears:

Leadership in Transition

By Karen Bonasso

There's no doubt about it - being restless is not fun. That's how I felt after four years as a professional librarian in an academic library. Don't get me wrong, I loved my job! However, I knew there was more out there for me to accomplish. I often found myself outreaching - could I help the high school students? What could I do to work with the university as a whole? The library had walls I wanted to break down. I just couldn't sit still.

I loved starting new projects, getting people involved, and accomplishing great initiatives. I loved using my negotiating skills, counselling students, talking to administrators and getting staff to see whatever we were working on differently. However there came a time where my spirit needed more fuel... more fire! (read: more responsibility!)

Or was I starting to feel that leadership was finally at the forefront of my career?

The Chance to Change Gears

In August 2003 a clever co-op student (whom I later hired) brought me a posting for an administrative position. Management! I gave it a try. Sent the resume, got letters of reference and went for the interview. Just one issue affected

my confidence: it was in a public library. What did I know about public libraries? I mean really know about them? I kept saying, "if this was in an academic library, I would know exactly what to do, how to handle the staff and the administrative duties" (yeah right!) I learned very quickly in the following months that, although location is important, it's how you deal with the people in place that can really make it or break it. That goes for any library: public, academic, special, government; indeed, for any managerial position, anywhere.

Getting the Job

I got the job offer on my birthday. I accepted. My next thought was...Oh my gosh! I'm going to be leading people! (I was good at projects....but people?) Then there was the "age thing" - here I was, barely 30 and my staff were...well... older! How were they going to accept a young manager? Better still, what could I tell them that they didn't already know? That's where coming from a different place with a different set of values and rules became my main asset. I figured, I'll tell them about my world and they will tell me about theirs. Talk about worlds colliding!

Facing my Fears

I freaked out for a while! I tried to think about how my leaders led me in the past. What did I find helpful? What was not so great? How about my staff? During my initiation, my employees, whom I was supposed to lead, actually lead me. They taught me my most important lessons; and the more I consulted them, the more they taught me. Actually, my staff teach me things every day. I think that was lesson No.1: A good leader never knows everything. It's actually the people around the leader who can be motivated to create a teaching and learning environment. (Hey, I come from academia; you know that teaching and learning are the bases of everything I relate to!). Talk about life-long learning.

I learned about the classification system (Dewey), the value system, collection development, computer use, the real meaning of "it's political," and serving a community with varied interests, quite different from serving a student population. The more I learned, the more I wanted my staff to share the duties of management. So, we set up committees of various interests and functions – I pulled in all types of different library staff and started discussing and writing... and then... slowly...changing, improving, and (my ultimate objective) empowering! It's not easy, and if you talk with many of my staff they will tell you some days are frustrating! It seems we don't accomplish anything. Still, we are getting RESULTS! Lesson No. 2: a good leader stays the course and keeps his/her sight on the objective.

Manager versus Fire Fighter

I'm lucky. I have great employees; they are dedicated and we work as a team. However, being a manager means that you are at the forefront. Earlier, naïve visions of myself, sitting in an office, dreaming up projects and timelines with no one bothering me make me laugh! I learned to keep my ears to the ground and my eyes open. So I have an open door policy. For real. On the first floor of the main library. Right next to the circulation desk. What drove me nuts for days is that the door wouldn't stay open! So I asked one of the maintenance personnel to find me a solution to keep it open. I named the solution after him.

How do I get anything done I wonder? But that depends on how you define "getting things done". As far as I'm concerned, I am there to accomplish the Public Library's mission towards the community through my staff. If a member of the community or my staff needs to talk about an issue, he/she can walk in; I will drop everything and try my best to solve the issue. Does it mean that I feel like I'm fighting fires? Sure it does! However when people walk out of my office smiling – I think about lesson No.3: a good leader knows how to listen, when to shut up and when to negotiate. People skills really do make a difference when it comes to motivation, and that's what leadership is all about: MOTIVATION. I often think:

I am so lucky. Where I work, it's Christmas everyday. I get to unwrap the gifts that others possess and put them to use!

Just like a fire fighter learns how and where to aim the hose to get the flames out, managers need to learn where and how to aim their words and actions to make a difference. This is a tough lesson to learn!

Leader? Manager?

In the end, I like to think that I manage projects by leading people. Managing is leading. Leading is managing. For me, it always boils down to the people I work with – working together to achieve a common objective. Isn't that the *raison d'être* of any organization? Academic or public?

To be honest, I do think back to easier times, when there were no human resource issues (know the collective agreement!), scheduling fiascos to approve (vacations, changes in hours, "I need to leave now my daughter is sick!"), and management obligations (decisions I make truly impact others). What do I miss most? The students, seeing them learn and grow because of our talents as Librarians. (Really, my staff know that I would take any shift on any desk in a heartbeat! That's part of leading too – getting out there and sharing what the staff go through daily).

But then, I wouldn't have learned what I know today, I wouldn't be what I am now.

Many people ask me "So, are you glad you made the switch?" My answer is: "Yes! Managing/leading people is awesome!"

Karen Bonasso is the Manager of Central and Sandwich Libraries and Information Literacy at the Windsor Public Library. She and her husband Joe recently welcomed their first child. In the picture opposite from left to right are librarian's Dave Milani, Karen Bonasso, Mark Bradley and Diana Pernal.

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