

Engaging Leadership

Leadership Writ Large, Beyond the Title

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It is going on six years since LLAMA, the Library Leadership and Management Association, changed their name from LAMA, the Library Administration and Management Association, to reduce the emphasis on administration and add the broader emphasis on leadership. In the first issue of *Library Leadership & Management* (v. 23, no. 1, Winter 2009), the LLAMA President's column, written by Molly Raphael (who went on to a larger role in ALA), explained the importance of the change and what was intended by it. In many ways, the change was reflective of a direction that the division had already been moving in considering development of leaders. However, I have repeatedly observed when interacting with individuals across the profession there is still a lot of confusion about what constitutes "leadership" and a strong bias toward defining it in terms of formal titles and roles that relate to managerial-styled responsibilities. There is a secondary aspect of this where it is interpreted as specifically leadership activities in the "unique" library context. This column will present some evidence of this bias and challenge readers to reconsider how we think and talk about leadership writ large.

LEADERSHIP "PROGRAMS"

One focus of current ALA President Maureen Sullivan has been leadership development, which is not surprising given her professional consulting experience and roles in leadership immersion programs such as ALA Emerging Leaders, TALL Texans sponsored by the Texas Library Association, and the ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute. Programs such as these often require a significant commitment of release time on the part of the institution and significant financial commitments for registration and travel costs. Some programs also have follow-up "projects" where the attendees are expected to get the opportunity to apply things learned during the program at their home institution. By virtue of these criteria and that they can only reach a relatively small number of participants each year, these programs are not an effective model for broad leadership education throughout the professional community. This does not mean they are not great programs. In fact, I have participated in several of them and known individuals who participated in others. I can personally attest to their value for individuals who do have titled leadership aspirations, either within their own institution or within their professional associations. However, repeatedly highlighting these programs reinforces the bias that "leadership" is for those that are targeted by succession planning to move up within the organizational chart or are already in formal leadership roles with significant organizational influence. A partial exception to this is the ALA Emerging Leaders program which is more oriented toward developing leadership within the association rather than at one's home institution. However, even it is intended to encourage aspirations to formalized leadership through serving as chairs of committees or task forces and standing for elected and appointed division, section, and round table roles.

If one explores development opportunities within most large public or private institutions, one will continue to see this developmental bias toward supervisory leadership. Typical training programs include supervisory and human resources topics like “Understanding FMLA,” “Conducting Performance Evaluations,” or “Communicating as a Supervisor.” One seldom sees institutional training or internal certificates on topics such as “Contributing to the Team Effort,” “Getting Comfortable with Constant Change,” “Becoming Self Reflective,” or “Effectively Communicating with Peers and Supervisors.” There is a lack of appreciation for these types of programs because of a mistaken perspective that individuals already come to professional roles knowing how to interact effectively with peers and authority figures and understand organizational culture. Recent studies of bullying and other anti-social conduct in schools and dysfunctional family units expose this assumption for the myth it is. Yet an organization’s overall success is going to be dependent on the commitment, engagement, and culture found at levels well removed from the administrative suite and this sort of peer-based leadership development may be what is more critically needed within organizational cultures to build grass roots leaders and move libraries forward.

Overinvesting in the structured or traditional management programs can also contribute to an elitism perspective that more significantly engages with the aspirational individual over the individual who chooses to stay as a front line librarian and develop or grow in more subtle ways of topical expertise and peer engagement. This is particularly problematic when an individual or the institutional culture ties holding a titled role to a perception of being more valued or respected. It can lead to individuals self-identifying or developing goals for future titled leadership opportunities without understanding the responsibilities or developing effective foundational leadership skills. It can also lead to a distorted view of leadership as one who has power or is “in charge”. Titled leaders are incredibly important in organizations because they are going to set the tone for the organization’s strategic priorities and culture. That said, an organization will not function with only titled leaders and as many titled leaders have learned to their chagrin, saying “go forth and do because I said so” on an initiative without gaining sufficient buy-in and engaging grass roots leadership is NOT a formula for success.

Within librarianship, one aspect of leadership that gets recognized fairly frequently is when one has led a team in the completion of a project or implementation of a new initiative. Similarly there are team-level awards in some institutions where the entire project team is recognized for being leaders. But it could be challenged that this is still a form of titled leadership because presumably the team was a chosen subset of employees that were put together for a specific purpose. Similarly, someone was selected as the team leader in a formally stated way and in this capacity one served as an “official” spokesperson. In some ways, this team leadership model is used in many institutions to prepare or test one’s readiness for stepping into the titled managerial leadership model.

All of these examples support the perspective of leadership as coupled with particular organizational roles or the potential to move into those roles. So even though we talk about leadership in broad strokes, institutional support and value-added performance still appears to be contextually directed toward titled leadership and succession planning.

RECRUITING FOR LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL

Last spring I attended the ACRL Conference in Indianapolis. While there, I sat in on a number of programs and discussion sessions relating to recruitment, retention, and hiring. In one session, a large group of newly degreed librarians were talking about the challenges of the job market and several of them spoke on the frustration associated with advertisements that wanted “leadership experience” when they have never had the opportunity to supervise or manage other library employees. There was a clear impression that the use of this descriptor was definitely being interpreted as a titled leadership role, and often explicitly within a library setting. Similarly, I was recently talking to a candidate who had contacted me about why she had not made the cut for an on-campus interview and how she could improve her application. In talking to the individual, I learned that she had extensive relevant and transferable leadership experience in a customer service environment prior to pursuing MLS, but that a career counselor at her college had told her not to include any of it because it would make her application too long and that she should only include material specific to libraries.

Confusion and assumptions by these candidates lead one to the question of how institutions that include leadership expectations in their posting ARE considering it in their application comparison rubric. Is it being interpreted broadly or narrowly? Are they scoring it based on supervisory experience as the individuals assumed? Or more broadly? For example, if a candidate wanted to use social based leadership, such as leading a student group or community service activity, will that be considered as satisfying a leadership expectation? An example might be someone who organized a house building team for Habitat for Humanity. This individual may have terrific communication and political skills and perspective on diversity, but will this transferable leadership potential be recognized in a scoring rubric. And what if the social activity was religious, political, or based on some other criteria that is not legal to consider in the hiring process? Does one have to have held a formal leadership role, such as a committee chair to get the credit? Or can one be recognized for grass roots leadership or leading from the middle as one who gets things done or motivates others through leadership by example? These are all issues that might fall under a rubric of leadership, but depending on the institution, manager, or search committee’s perspective on leadership might not be considered. Leadership and relevancy become highly subjective areas of assessment in this model.

I know that even in my own institution there is an initial tendency on the part of some hiring supervisors to want to give significant extra credit for library experience, regardless of whether it is actually relevant. Unfortunately, experience has shown that with all the changes that have taken place strategically and philosophically within libraries over the past 20 years, prior experience sometimes results in less successful hires where candidates must unlearn habits and practices picked up at their prior institution before they can work on learning the local organizational culture and performance expectations. However, by viewing leadership in a larger context, one can see the value that may have come from other workplace or life experiences in context of the needs of the position. For example, someone who worked commercial retail for an environment that values customers may bring better skills to a position than someone that worked in a library with an ultra-traditional, conservative viewpoint that one should protect the collection from the users.

RECOGNIZING LEADERSHIP IN THE RAW

So how likely are we to really recognize and value, or even celebrate, leadership skills outside of the formally titled managerial and supervisory model. This can vary greatly depending on one's personal definition of what constitutes "leadership" behaviors and one's level of environmental awareness. If one looks at the literature of "leadership" from the business and human resource, and human development sectors, one will find a myriad of leadership models that continue to change and evolve. Selfless or servant leadership is such an example in contemporary literature. Older articles talk about Type X and Type Y styles of management in context of leadership.

But what about quiet or even timid leadership in the individual member of the team that asks the "But, what about..." question that forestalls the failure of an initiative? Is this recognized and valued or do others who do not want to look closely at their shiny, perfect idea, dismiss concerns or label the individual as uncooperative or against change? If the latter occurs then one has just witnessed an event of leadership being squashed rather than nurtured. Or what about the bravery that comes from standing up against group-think to represent an unpopular but legitimate, ethical concern or alternative viewpoint? Librarians tend to be conflict averse and focus on getting along together in a way that sometimes undermines the ability to recognize leaders who seem too "passionate" or "assertive" in delivering their concerns or beliefs. On some occasions, acting as a leader will almost appear to be anti-leadership when it clashes with something a titled leader desires or challenges the titled leader's perspective. This can lead to mislabeling these individuals as problem or uncooperative employees rather than leaders.

In context of the lack of training on interacting effectively within the organizational hierarchy or with peers, sometimes an individual may have the burning passion of leadership for something but not have the communication or political negotiation skills to engage effectively on it within the different levels of the organization. In these cases, there is a missed opportunity for real and concrete leadership development. That said, this lobbying effort to broaden the recognition of leadership behaviors does not automatically excuse the conduct of all disruptive, hostile, or unhappy employees within an organization who disagree with a decision and work to actually undermine its success. The difference between being a leader and an anti-leader is that a true leader is focusing on the best decision for the needs of the organization or institutional users. Usually the anti-leader is focused on the impact that a decision or an action will have on them at a personal level. Additionally, a leader will work to be part of a solution or find alternative options than to take a "my way or no way" positional perspective.

A core characteristic in defining someone as a leader, is the willingness and ability to listen in a thoughtful and engaged way and work to communicate one's perspective effectively. This does not mean that one can automatically dismiss or ignore the barrier of an initial emotional response in order to engage, but it does mean that once a person has had a chance to present their view they must be willing to listen and consider the other perspective and be willing to seek a mutually satisfactory solution. This requires that the titled leadership also demonstrate leadership skills of listening and willing to change their perspective rather than being defensive to having one's ideas challenged. Part of leadership is choosing the appropriate leadership

behavior within context of a particular situation or circumstances. In this model, one is exercising strategic awareness and decision making, a definite characteristic of leadership. When both titled and grass roots leaders are committed to communicating as leaders, the potential for success is increased exponentially. But effective situational communication in a professional environment can be one of the most difficult skills for an individual to develop and is often given the least amount of attention in mentoring and developmental support.

We like to think of leadership as something obvious and clearly seen. However, leadership at the grass roots level or among the front line librarians and staff is much more subtle to identify. It is better to think of leadership as a section along a behavioral continuum that extends from passive disinterest (just tell me what to do and pay me my salary) to aggressive authoritarianism (I know how things should be done better than anyone else here). But one cannot always describe it with the exact same set of behaviors because it is not in a constant place on the continuum. Rather it will vary based on environmental and individual factors. Organizational disruptions or changes will tend to reveal the best and worst in individuals and can help in identifying grass roots leaders.

Another aspect of grass roots leadership is the ability to let others be human, make mistakes, learn from them, and grow. This is often evidenced by a sense of resiliency and underlying optimism that lets one move forward in a relationship rather than to forever hold another's actions or mistakes against them. This does not mean that one has to forever turn the other cheek and tolerate the person who thinks that saying "I'm sorry" automatically grants them forgiveness to go forward and commit the same inappropriate behavior. Rather it means giving others an opportunity to learn and grow from their mistakes into more valued contributors to the organization and see them for who they are today rather than what they did years ago.

[PUSHING BEYOND THE APPROPRIATE LEADERSHIP LEVEL](#)

Organizations must be careful not to make a mistake in assuming that demonstrating leadership at a grass roots level automatically makes someone a good candidate for promotion to a titled leadership role. When coupled with the hierarchical elitism or seeing management as a "desired" career path for anyone with ambition, this is a formula for organizational disaster. Different leadership roles emphasize different types and styles of leadership skills. Just because someone may be a good grass roots leader does not mean they will be effective as a titled leader. The key reason for this is passion and whether the individual has the ability to interact with others differently as the situation demands. Often a grass roots leader steps into the leadership role because they are particularly passionate about a particular issue that has a personal meaning to them.

Being a titled leader requires an entirely different skill sets and in fact one needs to be able to rein in the passion or be more willing than anyone else to consider a balanced or alternative perspective. If titled leadership is simply guided by those things they are passionate about, then their leadership will be unbalanced. One may not be able to maintain the distance or detachment necessary for very difficult decisions that one may be required to make. Similarly, one will be likely to neglect the definitely less passionate, dare say boringly routine, aspects of one's responsibilities. Suppose your passion is employee development and you are

enthusiastically committed to the improvement of every employee? You may do great on a committee that does developmental programming. But this does not automatically mean you will be a great supervisor if you cannot balance it with the understanding that some employees are not interested in development or where no amount of development activities will turn around a poor performer. One of the toughest decisions a titled leader may have to make is to let go of an employee, either through the employee's own decision or through a disciplinary process.

By necessity, successful titled leaders have to have that 30,000 feet view and be more strategically thoughtful and aware of the potential impact and influence of their actions. They must stay in the "adult" role in conflicts, rather than putting their own feelings or personal interests first. Grass roots leaders often invest in what they do at a microscopic level. They may or may not be able to move to this big picture perspective. Recognizing the value they provide without forcing them into a mold that does not actually fit their skillset is part of acknowledging that leadership extends well beyond the title one holds.

WRAP UP

In conclusion, we still have a long way to go in truly understanding and developing leadership in a way that looks at all the different facets in how it can manifest at the different levels in the organization. As a profession, we need to move beyond cultivating everyone with any leadership skills to be a "chief" or into a formal titled leadership role if they do not have the other skills needed. Similarly, we should not squash leadership efforts of individuals that do not think like those of us in titled leadership roles do. Instead, we need to better demonstrate value and appreciation for diversity in the expression of leadership, especially from front line or mid-career librarians.

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