

# I Am the Very Model of a Modern Middle Manager

John Lubans Jr.

A sprightly melody capered through my head while reading “What Gen X Will Need to Lead,” cover story in the May 2004 *American Libraries*.<sup>1</sup> In the article, upper-level managers prescribe the 105 (!) behaviors, values, and skills Gen X librarians will need to ascend to the lofty role of library leader. That capering tune was from *The Pirates of Penzance*: “I am the very model of a modern major general,” triggering my column title.<sup>2</sup>

Gilbert and Sullivan’s original lyrics lend themselves nicely to my parody:

MAJOR GENERAL: I’ve information vegetable, animal, and mineral.

[And, if we plug in a few of those 105 attributes:]

MIDDLE MANAGER: I’m very well acquainted, too, with matters AACR-able [rhymes with execrable]. I understand strategic planning, both the simple and quadratical.

ALL: She is the very model of a modern middle manager.

The *American Libraries* article joins a gaggle of lists—catechisms of the must-have traits for those who aspire to leaderly roles. There are grids of traits, octants of leadership styles, and Rubik-like three-dimensional cubes of traits, values, skills, and situations, all prescribing what it takes to lead.

As you may surmise, I have reservations about leadership recipes for aspiring middle managers. It is a stretch for me to buy into the underlying assumption that adapting yourself chameleon-like to “the way” will make you the leader you want to be. Can one acquire integrity the same way one masters the mechanics of strategic planning? For that matter, can one actually *learn* to be inspiring and astute? Those three qualities—integrity, inspiring, astute—are at the top of the *AL* list.

And, however desirable individual qualities may be, the lone individual cannot achieve lasting change in his or her

library without concurrent organizational change. Sure, being the very model of a modern middle manager can get you the job, but what of it if nothing changes—if the same old, same old continues organizationally?

## A Look in the Mirror

Besides the plaintive feedback about library land I’ve picked up in workshops and in management classes, I have seen first-hand some difficult places to work, ones that stifle the spirit, confound the creative, and punish those who question the inherited tradition.

I am not just talking about nightmare libraries—places that can’t do wrong right. When teaching about new roles for managers, I ask workshop participants to compare their *current* library organization to their *ideal* organization. The chart each participant uses has the hierarchical model on the left side and the loosely knit, team-based organization on the right with six organizational elements (such as information flow, decision making, and work processes) to be marked along a continuum. Then the participants connect their dots, drawing two lines down the chart, one for the way it is and the other for the way they wish it was. Ninety-nine percent of the librarians work in libraries that hug the handrail on the left—the command-and-control model. The line for the organization they *want* is on the other side of the page, separated by a vast chasm.

Speaking of nightmare libraries, here’s one that would qualify for several panels of Dilbert:

The cold harsh truth . . . is that life in an academic library can be as cutthroat and petty as in any other (faculty) department. They can be places where internal politics ruin careers and lives, personal grudges are held for years, and biting criticisms fly orally and in writing. My own library, unfortunately, fits that bill. . . .

People have filed grievances, been “invited” to resign, stepped down, met with university and private lawyers, and generally picked each other

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apart over minutiae. We've had so many resignations someone suggested renaming the library newsletter *The Daily Resignation*.<sup>3</sup>

If we are to retain and promote the best young librarians, especially those of Gen X, we'll have to work on the larger issue of changing the organizational culture in which these best librarians work. Failing to do that will only further diminish an already depleted talent pool for the top jobs.

A library leader told me how he was invited by a director colleague to speak to her staff. The talk was about how he had changed—with amazing success—the traditional ways of doing things in his library, turning around attitudes and boosting productivity.

Less than a quarter of the way through his speech, the staff began to "Amen!" The leader explained how he gave each staff member a voice—empowering them—regardless of position, how he opened up the budget for everyone to see and influence, how he sought shared decision making, and how he rewarded mistake making and radical thinking. The other director fidgeted in obvious dismay: This was *not* what she wanted her staff to hear! She may have been expecting a talk that would somehow shame or otherwise light a fire under her moribund staff. If her staff was moribund, maybe it was due to the way *she* did business and that the policies and systems in her library were significantly responsible.

Libraries, like any long-term bureaucracy, often acquire layers of policies and procedures—the systematic rules for how we do our work. Unless rigorously and regularly questioned, this system can lead to an inflexible library, resisting change efforts in seemingly irrational ways. No wonder Gilbert and Sullivan found ready-made characters for spoofing among those many "afflicted by their office" in bureaucracies.

New administrative teams often bring in outside consultants to help assess what is happening. Invariably, in my experience, the consultants, with a wink and a knowing nod, allude to the pervasive intractability of the entrenched staff. Our acquiescence with the consultant's perspective leads to an implicit lack of respect for the staff, setting up an us-versus-them mindset.

In one library, we ignored the consultant's ready-made advice and discovered that, sure, there were some entrenched and alienated staff, but most people wanted to do a good job—they just needed permission. And, once change efforts started, I learned the staff were often up against inherited structures, policies, and procedures. Like molasses, these were miring the staff's innovative spirit and intent.

When the University of Oklahoma men's basketball team lost a game in early 2005, Coach Kelvin Sampson said something extraordinary. Instead of blaming the players, he blamed himself, saying, "The loss reflects on the coaches." I wish some library directors would look inward

when they believe their staff is not up to snuff. If the staff is unimaginative, what's the cause? Fear of what might happen to them for rocking the library's boat? Frustration in having to run a gauntlet of nitpickers for every new idea?

## First Steps

My case study at the 2004 LAMA National Institute was about a real librarian's experience in a university library. The case was based on more than just the one librarian (let's call her Kelly), because her situation paralleled that of a dozen of her self-declared Gen X peers with whom she met monthly as the "top-secret librarians group" (TSLG) for dinner. One evening the group's members, who work in research libraries in New York City, shared opinions about managerial jobs.

I do not know Kelly's peers, but if they are anything like her, they all fit my definition of an effective follower in the library—imaginative, independent thinking, and articulate with a passion for fulfilling his or her vision of the library's mission. Those of you who have read my column, "Leading from the Middle," know that effective followers are at risk; they need to be protected and encouraged.<sup>4</sup>

Here is the case study:

You are the new director of a medium-sized library.

The library's department heads come across as risk avoiding and reactive—protecting their turf while maintaining an acceptable level of library service—hardly great, but adequate.

You want more. The user community wants more. You were hired to get this library off dead center.

Well, how do you get more people in the middle willing to take the lead in thinking through the tough issues; in other words, how do you increase the number of effective followers and potential leaders?

Today, Kelly, one of the librarians you've come to regard as insightful and is well respected by other staff, comes to see you. You are disappointed when she tells you she is resigning to take a job with an electronic publisher.

You try to change her mind, telling her that she has the capacity and the ability to be a department head and that you wish she would stay for the next opening. Her response surprises you.

First, she acknowledges she is of a generation that simply isn't willing to work as hard as she saw her parents work. She wants a better balance between work and home and yet wants to be recognized and rewarded for doing a good job.

Second, in this library, management jobs are more stressful than satisfying. There are no

happy, effective manager role models—all of the managers look miserable, preoccupied, rubbing their temples and frowning at any interruption while on their punctilious rounds of endless meetings.

Third, she's observed that the staff size in this library is declining. Because of budget constraints, anyone promoted to department head will see his or her former job frozen or lost. Worse, Kelly believes that because of the senior people at the top and the lack of any new people, power is becoming concentrated at the top. The staff's term for the executive office during the previous administration was "The Bunker." The former director was known for making solo decisions with only minimal explanation after the fact.

And fourth, Kelly's taking on a library management position would mean walking away from the service activities that brought her into librarianship.

While you fail to retain Kelly—she's made up her mind—you do not want to lose any others like her. What can you do?

After discussing the case, institute participants developed tangible strategies and structures to infuse the values, concepts, and behaviors—a culture—supportive of effective followers. I suggest the reader reflect similarly and consider what can be done. Take a small step or two toward retaining a promising library leader.

## Low Scores

There were some attributes in the *AL* article rated as *least* important. Under managerial qualities, these were ranked low:

- facilitating group processes
- resolving conflicts
- developing partnerships with groups and organizations
- creating an environment that fosters accountability

And, under personal characteristics, these got low scores:

- a sense of humor
- good interpersonal skills
- ability to ask the right questions
- team-building skills
- commitment to explaining decisions

Are these not, actually, vital qualities for leaders who hope to create welcoming, supportive, and open organizations?

## A Challenge

Back in 1987 Posner and Kouzes identified what best leaders do.<sup>5</sup> Those behaviors ring just as true today. While the P&K results are well known—library leadership institutes teach them—few library leaders live those behaviors. The clock is ticking for our graying generation, yet there is still time to show the next generation how you—yes, you the incumbent—"challenge the process, inspire a shared vision, enable others to act, model the way, and, encourage the heart."<sup>6</sup>

Demonstrate *those* qualities—that's what Gen X needs to lead.

## References and Notes

1. Arthur Young, Peter Herson, and Ronald Powell, "What Will Gen Next Need to Lead?" *American Libraries* 35, no. 5 (May 2004): 32–35. "Our various studies included data and commentary from more than 70 library directors and assistant and associate directors who serve in member institutions of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), as well as directors of medium-sized academic libraries that belong to ALA's Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and directors of medium and large-sized public libraries."
2. Listen to it at "The Pirates of Penzance by Gilbert and Sullivan." Accessed Apr. 29, 2005, [http://diamond.boisestate.edu/gas/pirates/web\\_op/pirates13.html](http://diamond.boisestate.edu/gas/pirates/web_op/pirates13.html).
3. Emily Edmondson (pseudonym), "Checking Out Her Options" *Chronicle of Higher Ed*. Accessed Sept. 30, 2004, <http://chronicle.com/jobs/2004/09/2004093001c.htm>.
4. John Lubans Jr., "Leading from the Middle," *Library Administration and Management* 18, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 205–7.
5. James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).
6. Alison Murray Kuller, ed., *Readings from the Hurricane Island Outward Bound School* (Rockland, Maine: HIOB, 1986).