

# Balaam's Ass

## Toward Proactive Leadership in Libraries

John Lubans Jr.

This column is not the one I planned to write. I was going to follow up with more on coaching.

Why the detour? A convergence of events—conversations at June's ALA Annual Conference about leadership, influential summer reading, and some early-morning lakeside reflections on the themes in my columns—moves me to consider library leadership, the reactive and the proactive. I want to offer ideas on how libraries can become more proactive.

Part of my summer reading was a P. G. Wodehouse compendium of the Jeeves and Wooster saga.<sup>1</sup> Besides much laughter, it gave me the column's title. Even the endearingly fluffy-headed Bertram Wooster gets fed up. There comes a time when Bertie digs in his heels and takes a stand, like the Biblical ass of Balaam. If you are a Wodehouse aficionado, you will recall that Bertie took great pride in winning his private school's Scripture Knowledge prize by correctly relating, *mirabile dictu*, Balaam's story. A reference to Balaam's ass was never far away whenever Bertie reached his personal guff limit, drawing a line in the sand, "We Woosters have our pride!"

The Balaam story is a metaphor for good leadership, a leadership that is made right by the follower, even when beaten three times for refusing to do his master's bidding. Because of potential beatings, playing the recalcitrant donkey is never easy. A recent court ruling by U.S. District Judge Barbara Jones against Betty Vinson, a WorldCom executive who falsified accounts, suggests what happens when followers go along: "Ms. Vinson was among the least culpable members of the conspiracy at WorldCom"; still, "had Ms. Vinson refused to do what she was asked, it's possible this conspiracy might have been nipped in the bud."<sup>2</sup>

Barbara Kellerman's *Bad Leadership* was far less fun than Wodehouse but noteworthy because of her premise that bad leaders and bad followers spoil the leadership stew.<sup>3</sup> Indeed her seven bad leader types include some I have run into in our profession—the callous, the incompetent, the insular, and the intemperate, each a treacherous reef beneath our seemingly placid library waters.

Leadership is an equation, not a person. There are two elements to the left of the equals sign: leader and follower ( $L + F = \text{Leadership}$ ). Leadership is not neutral, it is often good or bad, depending on the values leaders and followers bring to the mix.

James MacGregor Burns defines leadership as "leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations . . . of both leaders and followers."<sup>4</sup>

### "Hypocrisy Abounds"

Kellerman's book underscored conversations at June's ALA Annual Conference.

A friend labors at a prestigious university library, a learning organization professing openness and collaboration. I have long respected my friend's clear thinking, independence, and pragmatism. Just prior to Conference, the boss told my friend to muzzle her troops—no more questioning administrative unilateral decisions—and to align her staff with the administrative lead.

This admonition, and a recent unexplained relocation of her work group, dismissed my friend's and her staff's ability to work collaboratively toward good solutions. "Hypocrisy abounds" is how she sums up the difference between what this organization professes and what it practices.

Like many resilient followers, saddled with callous or incompetent leaders, my friend has developed hidden networks within and outside the library to cope and to get work done. That's a high-risk strategy but essential for one's self-respect and for achieving one's personal vision. Kellerman's book offers a few pages of additional strategies ("self help" and "working with others") on what followers



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can do for themselves when confronted with a bad boss. Kellerman's advice also applies to any follower seeking to be as effective as possible.<sup>5</sup>

At the June Annual Conference there also was disquieting news from the commercial side. A vendor colleague gave me a jaw-dropping report on his boss's temper tantrum at a sales meeting. When my friend politely asked a provocative question about the corporate vision, the sales manager hurled a volley of expletives and a glass of ice water at my friend's head. Behavior like this, in a firm known for its punctilious dignity, is as outrageous as would be Jeeves's mooning one of Bertie's aunts.

Moreover, I was bemused at Conference when a couple of respected library leaders told me that my notion of administratively letting go was OK as long as it was not in their back yards. There were few, if any, librarians in their shops to make responsible decisions. Musically speaking, no way could their orchestras play without a conductor!

## The Reactive Library

Is your library proactive (doing) or reactive (being done to)? In my workshops, I hear a lot about the reactive variety, almost to the exclusion of the proactive.

Looking back on the several leader and follower roles in my career, I count myself fortunate for the many proactive leaders I worked with. These leaders helped me, with their encouragement and trust, to be proactive personally and to achieve goals I set for myself. Ours was a proactive leadership.

But, I have worked with a few leaders who were overly cautious and mistrustful of change initiatives. They were not necessarily incompetent, perhaps they simply lacked confidence in their vision. Whatever the reason, they preferred to play it safe, to be reactive rather than to anticipate new directions and services. After my ideas were rebuffed by them several times, my default was to let things take their course, to keep a low profile.

One is never alone in this reactive, languid flow—there were other library leaders and followers bobbing along with me. Drifting takes less energy and has less risk than proactively doing. Yes, there's something to be said for the comforts of the reactive life, unless being done to involves a poke with a sharp stick.

Consider this compelling story. Two hospitals were involved in a mix-up of elevator hydraulic fluid with liquid soap used for sterilizing surgical instruments. Someone erroneously put hydraulic fluid into soap barrels. One hospital performed thirty-eight hundred surgeries with instruments washed in the hydraulic fluid. The other hospital did zero surgeries with instruments washed in the hydraulic fluid.<sup>6</sup> Why?

This latter hospital has a policy of empowering staff to take action . . . "anybody, at any time, if they have

suspicions on something like this, they can just stop it." Significantly, "the people who sounded the alarm and stopped the cleaning process were instrument technicians, not high-ranking corporate officers . . ."<sup>7</sup>

The other hospital ignored their front line staff's red flag that the surgical instruments were coming out tacky. That hospital, while claiming that the hydraulically bathed instruments were safe, faces lawsuits from several of the thirty-eight hundred patients who think otherwise.

Fortunately, most of us don't need a lawsuit to change our ways. On a personal level, I recall my disappointment when a colleague did a 180° on his leaderly compass. What jolted me out of my reactive stance was his accepting as normal a five-year gap between his reference department's observing the Internet's siphoning off of more than half of the reference question market share to actually doing something about it. In other words, it took this department half a decade to move from point A (behind the desk) to point B (outside the desk) in response to this highly visible shift in information-seeking behavior.

Not only was he reconciled to the long wait, he regretted his earlier impatience. Well, maybe my colleague was mellowing, but accommodating years of delay sounds more addled than mellow. Perhaps my colleague was accepting the reality of working in a classically reactive library so his U-turn might have been a matter of survival—"if you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

What do I mean by proactive leadership? Being proactive is acting in advance to deal with an expected or observed difficulty. It requires followers to be engaged and concerned with what is happening, to be intelligent about the big picture. Librarians have been proactive—interlibrary loan, book mobiles, OCLC, user education, and the British Library's Document Supply at Boston Spa are early examples. Paraphrasing Burns, the proactive organization's genius is found in the ways leaders engage followers in an enterprise that builds on their own and their effective followers' values and motivations, just like those early library initiatives did.

When you think about it, Jeeves is the quintessential effective follower, never compromising his personal values while rescuing his leader in each comedic venture. Jeeves thinks independently and is a leader in the butler's pantry. And, he is committed to a higher calling, the "feudal spirit to oblige." The point is that Jeeves has something external to himself—a philosophy, not a boss—guiding his actions.

## Why the Reactive Stand?

For one thing, there is much suspicion in the not-for-profit sector about business strategies that seek to empower staff. Usually the strategy starts off wrong

when it is imposed, top down, by administrators outside the library. Invariably, these administrators exempt themselves from the strategy, at best a mixed message. When applied in this way, with inadequate funding, training, and explanation, the strategy falters and is easily sabotaged and legitimately criticized for being superficial. The new way of working soon falls to the wayside. It implodes not from any superior value in the hierarchy but because of ambiguous goals and inadequate understanding and commitment.

The hierarchy—the pecking order—remains our dominant organizational structure, however dysfunctional. There's an undeniable inherent premise: everyone needs a supervisor. In other words, no one can be trusted too much. While those at the top of the pecking order might fantasize otherwise, most people—especially skilled and well-trained staff—resent being told what to do, however subtle the order. Our chains of command, performance appraisals, and salary structures are control mechanisms.

And, more than any other organizational structure, the top-down arrangement encourages a reactive followership. Hierarchies or bureaucracies do function—some quite well—but only with an extraordinary commitment to and understanding among managers about what employees want: adequate elbow room for decision making, variety and meaning in what they do, mutual support and respect, opportunities to learn on the job, and a desirable future.<sup>8</sup> Managers who focus on cultivating this type of organizational environment help make hierarchies productive.

Unions and professional associations have made inroads toward a more participatory workplace; kudos to them. However, these agencies appear to be stuck on a plateau, more worried about giving up gains and not being pushed off the cliff rather than staging an assault for greater democracy.

## A Proactive Leadership

I believe we need more libraries that are encouraging workplaces with a commitment to bring out the best in each person; a workplace that is bold and collaborative in decision making and action taking, anticipative and responsive to our many challenges.

Most of my columns since 1999 share a common thread: proactive leadership. My stories on Don Riggs, Simone Young, Saul Zabar, a women's basketball team, and the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra are about leaders and followers who leave the comfort zone and get it right. Because several of my cases are drawn from outside of libraries, you might ask, for example, "How can Zabar's (the world's best food store) have anything to offer libraries?" Well, we actually have much in common and the different perspective gained through looking at how Zabar's

achieves its mission helps us better understand how to achieve ours. Another agency's success in being proactive just might give us the confidence to give it a try.

## Asking Jeeves

A Jeeves and Wooster story often turns when Bertie realizes he's in a predicament and looks beseechingly to Jeeves, he of the eyes "agleam with the light of pure intelligence" and size nine-and-a-quarter hat.

Now, it's my turn to do the beseeching. I wonder out loud: "What would Jeeves tell us about moving an organization from reactive to proactive?"

Hearing his name, Jeeves shimmered in.

"Indeed, I am pleased to oblige, sir. Permit me to suggest seven stratagems."

1. For new hires, stress credentials less, spirit and independent thinking more. A pool of credentialed rigid applicants is hardly preferable to one including inexperienced applicants with positive attitudes.
2. Increase integrated decision making, decrease top-down decisions. The people doing the work meet with leaders and develop best collaborative solutions. Solutions emerge when intelligent people engage in open and honest discussion.
3. Flatten the administration, spread out administrative responsibility. Reduce the number of administrators while upgrading the responsibility and authority of the unit heads or team leaders. Invest overhead savings into frontline staff and staff development.
4. If they are worthy, make clear your organizational values. These values relate to how people work together, how they treat each other, what the library aspires to be. Say them, mean them, do them, every day.
5. Experiment more, spend less time in committees contemplating what might go wrong. Find out by doing. Make more mistakes in pursuit of best solutions.
6. Use self-managing teams or other constructs that require critical thinking and decision making by followers. Leader roles throughout the library should be fluid, with turn-taking every few years.
7. Increase staff development budgets to train everyone in soft and hard skills. Establish a staff development strategy and replace formal performance evaluation meetings with career development conversations. Rigorously evaluate staff development purpose and outcomes.

"You are a marvel, Jeeves!"

"I endeavour to give satisfaction, sir." And, he trickled off.

End of detour. I've kicked up my heels, brayed loudly, and probably stepped in a hornet's nest or two. No doubt, it is time to heed Bertie's wisdom when quoting the poet: "Exit hurriedly, pursued by a bear."

## References and Notes

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4. James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 100.
5. Kellerman, *Bad Leadership*, 239-43.
6. Jim Shamp, "Wake Forest Tells How It Avoided Fluid Mix-Up," *The Herald-Sun*, July 2, 2005.
7. Ibid.
8. Fred Emery's research outcomes appear in John Lubans Jr., "Orchestrating Success (The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra)" in *People in Charge: Creating Self Managing Workplaces*, ed. Robert Rehm (Stroud: Hawthorn Pr., 1999), 187-97.

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