

Learning to Lead

A Transatlantic Perspective

John Lubans, Jr.

This essay follows my less than bounding-with-joy reflection on management training and development (T&D) of two issues ago.¹ The perceptive reader of that column picked up some bluesy notes in my plaintive ode about conducting T&D for managers. While many of the participants are engaged, and some workshops smoothly sail along, I have come up against seemingly bored and smug participants. Their boredom could be “my bad,” I suppose, some failing on my part, but maybe some librarians are overly cozy with the way things are. They do not want to engage anything that might upset their apple carts. Or, they come from libraries that prefer not to change. Whatever the reason, their learning switch is in “off” mode.

In short, I was ready for a change. So, when my British Airways flight touched down one misty December afternoon at Riga International Airport (RIX), I had a pleasant anticipation that this seminar would be different. Iveta Gudakovska, the director of the University of Latvia Biblioteka, had invited me, with support from the *Kulturas Informācijas Sistēmas*, an agency of the Latvian Ministry of Culture, to develop and present a leadership program. While the invitation was extended a year prior, the actual idea developed in fits and starts with long pauses in between as I tried to get clarification around what she, the client, wanted and hoped to achieve. The ambiguity persisted—no contract or written commitment—so I scratched my head, furrowed my brow, and finally concluded I was in “boots and all,” come what may. Since Ms. Gudakovska knew my T&D approach from attending a highly interactive workshop I did in Riga in 2000, it was unlikely that I’d surprise her with anything I did. I was pretty sure she wasn’t looking for an expert to give them solutions.

Once past my need for certainty, I felt freed up to tailor a program based on what I thought they might

enjoy and learn from. If nothing worked out, I’d take the week in Riga to visit with family and be a tourist. Latvia is only recently freed from the Soviet way of life. For fifty years prior to 1991, anyone with contrarian notions like individual freedom was shipped to Siberia or worse. The nation is now on its own once again and making steady progress. This progress comes in spite of a lost generation of leaders. It is the young leaders, like Ms. Gudakovska, who are taking this Baltic country of some two million to the next level.

In mid-2006, the *New York Times* Cultured Traveler was impressed with the iconoclastic state of the arts in Latvia: “And why, say the town’s fathers and mothers (women play a huge role in this young society), should Riga’s cultural institutions remain bound by the past?”² I’ve come to believe this preference for getting on with it permeates other agencies in Latvia, beyond the performing arts.

Ints Dalderis, thirty-six, clarinetist and the managing director of the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra, likes it “that things can change so fast. If I went to play in a German orchestra, everything would be fixed for three years; there would be no surprises.”³ Another exemplar of the youth movement is Andris Nelsons, the principal conductor of the Latvian National Opera, appointed to that position at age twenty-three! In the arts, at least, the Latvians are making choices reminiscent of a quote from the maestro conductor and cellist, Nikolaus Harnoncourt, “The [artistic] decision is not between safety and risk; the decision is between safety and beauty.”⁴

My musical metaphor is uniquely fitting—Latvia is a nation of singers and of ancient folk songs; some one million *dainas* have been anthologized. At RIX’s “last-chance-to-buy-Latvian” tourist shop, the VCR monitor blares out the spectacle of tens of thousands of Latvian singers from the world over in Riga for the midsummer song festival. You can select from dozens of videos, from miked and dancing chorales of towheaded five-year-olds to throngs of senior choristers. The national love of music explains why one of the first post-Soviet renovation projects, despite a beggared treasury, was the national opera house. The



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opera house, for the Cultured Traveler, “is a fine metaphor for the new Riga; its cultivated façade masks an underlying exuberance.”⁵ And, a magnificently restored interior.

I had good reason to look forward to the seminar. The Riga workshop in 2000 gave me at least two insights. First, the participants wanted no more “Big Brother,” the authoritarian state. Instead, they *wanted* the best kind of teamwork in participatory and inclusive organizations.

The other realization among those workshop participants was that their individual decisions, “*How we decide*,” replaced what the instructor—the alleged expert—decides. They were keenly aware of this shift in themselves and they (like most of us) relished the newfound freedom.

The Design

Enjoying this same freedom, I developed a three-day seminar, “Learning to Lead: Leadership in Academic Libraries” to run on consecutive days:

Day 1: Leading

Day 2: Leading and Following

Day 3: Coaching for Results—Helping Others

The curriculum was (are you surprised?) *interactive*. To bridge the language barrier I had a Latvian librarian colleague in Chapel Hill translate many of the handouts of worksheets, definitions, role plays, and case studies ahead of the seminar. I knew from the 2000 experience that a verbatim on-site translation would eat up too much time and that many nuances could be lost. And, lest I make the common mistake of presuming I was a font of wisdom from which would pour knowledge into the “empty vessel” participants, I clarified my underlying assumptions and role in the preface to the seminar:

I know that what “works” in American libraries may not necessarily work in Latvian libraries. You are the best judges of that. And, I want to hear and to understand how you manage and lead. I expect to learn as well as teach.

I was not there to pitch American ways of management or to stump for how American academic libraries are presently managed.

I did tell them that what I had to say was influenced by contemporary leadership theories and by way of actual experience as an academic library leader. These were my lessons learned from mistake-induced bumps and bruises and from the happy moments when things worked well. Bottom-line, this was my take on leading and it came with a strong bias: Freedom—a freedom in the workplace for the person doing the job to make decisions about that work. But more important was their role. I told them, “You are essential to the success of these workshops. Your taking

part, your being engaged, your paying attention, your being open are all essential. If you have questions, if you are confused, I need to know that. I also need to know if you are learning, if you are enjoying what we are doing.”

Since the participants were mostly directors and deputies, I was explicit about *their* leadership role in introducing change into their organizations. I prefaced activities with pointed questions:

- “What sort of organizational culture is necessary for effective follower behaviors to flourish? What do senior leaders need to be doing so junior leaders can thrive?”
- “How does the leader create an environment where workers have elbow room, variety, support and respect, and a desirable future? What is the leader’s role?”

I was trying to make clear that organizational change is driven by the leader, but only if the leader changes and exhibits daily the desired values for change. If the leader speaks about change but *does* nothing, nothing will change.

What Did I Learn?

Several things stand out from those three days at the University of Latvia.

Helping Others

Perhaps unique and predictive of this young leadership culture was how participants helped each other, even when competing (see photo 1). Some observers were so engaged by the team effort, they helped the team they were observing build, even though they would shortly be building their own “pyramid.” This picture has my non-participant student assistant, Eva Auseja (in jeans), helping! I saw enough of this collaborating spirit to conclude these library directors help each other out whenever and however they can.

Spontaneous collaboration is something I encourage, but rarely observe. In my experience, American groups do not collaborate to gain maximum success. Perhaps that lack of cooperation is due to an ingrained competitive spirit, as some claim. I recall an exercise at one university where the point of the activity was for four teams to cooperate in order to achieve the greatest customer satisfaction. Even after I made several overt suggestions, nods, winks, and other blatant hints, the teams did not cooperate. Each team studiously ignored the other three and went on to post miserable levels of customer satisfaction. At least they were consistent!

What happened in Riga was a first for spontaneous collaboration. It also represented a first, for me, for participants not abiding by the printed instructions. Like the *New York Times* observed: “Rules? What rules? Riga, cultured, ener-

getic, and young, is making them up as it goes along.”⁶ That’s what they did when it came time for the one-on-one feedback from observers to builders. One group of observers chose to give feedback to the *entire* team instead of individuals, as the directions had it.

While not excelling in all activities, the Latvians achieved some remarkable successes. Not only did they have strong enthusiasm for engaging and enjoying the planned activities, they also expressed an advanced understanding of the underlying meanings. The “Mirage exercise” was not just leaders verbally sharing their “vision” of a hidden geometric figure so teams could replicate it in a drawing. Their analysis focused precisely on the challenges in any leader’s communicating their true vision—of being heard—and on how they individually could be better communicators.

Of course, all did not go smoothly. I made my share of mistakes, from forgetting a key direction in one of the group activities, to not realizing that the word *coach* in Latvian only means *athletic trainer*—no more. And there were complications with the audio-visual equipment. In spite of these inconveniences, somehow the meaning got through.

I was impressed with the participants’ clear thinking, openness, and the forthright pragmatism of any action-taking they proposed. For one thing, they understood that change could not bypass the top. Isolated initiatives, while positive, would never be enough to change an organization overall. I was taken with the participants understanding that *they* would have to change if they wanted their organization to change. These leaders knew that developing a supportive organization to nurture future leaders had to start with them and their policies and behaviors. There was no avoiding or ambiguity or anything self-serving in how they would proceed to create a supportive culture.

At the end of the three days we circled up for the “Human Compass.” This is an introspective activity I’ve based on the Native American medicine wheel. It uses the points of the compass paired with unique animal totems—bear, eagle, mouse, and buffalo—as representative zones and qualities for where one is in life and career. In the first round—where you are now—several put themselves in the arduous north, amidst the ice and snow, slogging alongside the wise and sage buffalo. When I asked them, in the second phase, to move to where they wanted to be, the north emptied out! That suggested that, like their nation, they were on their way to reaping the benefits of working hard and long to



Photo 1: A team effort. This activity did result in a best-ever effort. In ten minutes, a team produced the tallest (more than 9 feet) freestanding structure in all the time I’ve used the Pyramid exercise in dozens of venues over several years!



Photo 2: At three days’ end. Here we are (a few missed the photo op) gathered on the rostrum in the enchanting Small Aule of the University of Latvia. Iveta Gudakovska, principal organizer of the seminar, is in the front row, second from left.

overcome past repressions; if anyone was, they were ready for the next step toward fulfillment of their ambitions.

So What?

That is a question I often ask workshop participants. I mean for them to reflect on how an activity applies to their

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unable to do so? Is the reason because they continue to be of primary importance to the users? If not, what is the reason they continue? What are your primary needs for new funds? How does the value to your clients of these proposed services and activities relate to the value of services and activities of long duration? Which services or activities continue to hang on primarily because of a few determined staff who can not picture your library without them?

Coming to a decision to stop an activity of long and continuing value is hard for every library staff. Telling users, "We are not doing that anymore," is harder. But

this needs to be done. If it isn't, your library will not disappear in the way the vacuum tube manufacturers did, but its value to its community and the concomitant size of its budget will decrease.

References

1. Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Anchor Bks., 2000), 235.
2. *Ibid.*, 236.

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work, to their life. Likewise, in this column, what transfers are there for me and you, the reader, from Riga?

Well, we cannot participate in the sense of liberation gained in Latvia, nor can we instill in ourselves the pride of place that drives that little country. As with much of life experience, you have to be there.

What we *can* acquire and seek to emulate is how the Latvians engaged the seminar; how they wanted to hear other perspectives. Theirs was an open mind-set, a world view towards the possible, towards doing rather than waiting. Listening to me, they were not looking for a magic bullet or a prescription. Whatever I shared with them they made their own or tossed it out. And (I cannot underestimate this quality), they were *playful* and still able to learn.

These library leaders anticipated their role in facilitating an environment for learning, in creating a proactive ambiance, in offering support and opportunity to staff who question the way things are, who prefer not to cling to safety. Like Mr. Harnoncourt, these leaders are seeking the beauty that abounds beyond safety.

References and Notes

1. John Lubans, Jr., "'Thank God and Greyhound, She's Gone,' (to a Workshop), and Other T&D Matters," *Library Administration & Management* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 35-37. www.ala.org/ala/lama/lamapublications/laandm/lamhome/lamonline.htm (accessed Feb. 6, 2007).
2. Anne Midgette, "Creating an Identity through the Arts" (Cultured Traveler, Riga, Latvia) *New York Times*, Jul. 16, 2006, Travel Section, 10. <http://travel2.nytimes.com/2006/07/16/travel/16riga.html> (accessed Jan. 28, 2007). Includes a picture of the swanky interior of the opera house.
3. *Ibid.*, 10.
4. As quoted by Simone Young, manager and artistic director, principal musical director, Staatsoper Hamburg, in an interview with the author, Dec. 6, 2006, Hamburg, Germany.
5. Midgette, "Creating an Identity through the Arts," 10.
6. *Ibid.*, 10.