

Identifying the Presence of Ineffective Leadership in Libraries

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Most research and commentary about administration and management, particularly in scholarship devoted to libraries and librarianship, focuses on defining and celebrating the elements that constitute effective leadership. Articles, books, and websites abound extolling the praises of best practices such as open communication, staff development, and ethical leadership, as well as statements of strategy, focus, and vision. The assumption, then, may be that *ineffective* leadership represents the *absence* of these factors that make for successful administrators and managers. This paper will propose that there are “etiologies of ineffective leadership,”¹ i.e., a set of causes that can be readily identified that define ineffective leadership and management in libraries. This paper will suggest that ineffective leadership can be defined by the *presence* of certain elements. An adherence to negative values - not treating others as you would expect to be treated, moral disengagement – defined as “disregarding or minimizing the injurious effects of ones actions”², and micromanagement are all factors that can be identified when evaluating ineffective leadership.

An unwillingness to involve stakeholders in decisions and the inability or unwillingness to think institutionally are readily identifiable indicators of ineffective leadership as well. Recent studies suggest that to be effective, library leadership must involve all stakeholders in the operation of the library. Jon Cawthorne writes that shared leadership is “defined as the dynamic, interactive influence process involving more than just the downward influence on subordinates. Shared leadership is broadly distributed among a group of individuals instead of centralized in a single individual (e.g., the library director)”³ Hierarchical leadership often ignores the expertise and input of librarians and library staff, resulting in poor decisions being made due to insufficient or incorrect information. Ineffective leadership also often dismisses the effectiveness of team-based organizations in the library, which studies show allow “for increased productivity, increased motivation for service to customers, and flexibility to respond to environmental changes , such as technology and budget changes.”⁴ Shared leadership has been found to have a variety of positive characteristics, among them mutual trust; employee empowerment in planning, organization, and goal setting; and shared accountability for performance.⁵ These are all hallmarks of effective leadership, but do not address how to identify ineffective leadership. By taking the perspective that ineffective leadership can indeed be described and identified by the presence of certain factors, it can be more skillfully addressed and resolved.

A discussion of ineffective leadership should not lead one to believe that ineffective leaders cannot be changed. Indeed, defining the problem is the first step towards change. Every library employee has a certain amount of institutional power that can be focused and used in a positive

and proactive manner to influence changes that will improve the library. Power, the ability to influence events and institutions to move them in the direction you think they should go, is something that anyone can exercise. In his fascinating new book *The Elements of Power*, Terry Bacon outlines a model of power that addresses not only ineffective leadership, but the ways in which the led can persuade the leaders to behave in a manner that they believe would be most beneficial to the organization. Bacon identifies five sources of power that everyone has by virtue of their position and participation in their organization. These five types of power are: role, resource, information, network, and reputation. He further identifies power that stems from one's personal attributes: knowledge, expressiveness, attraction, character, and history. Finally and most importantly, Bacon identifies what he describes as a "meta-source" of power – willpower – which he describes as having "a substantial magnifying effect" on all of the sources of power listed above.⁶ Understanding and applying these elements of power in a positive manner are essential when working to influence ineffective leaders.

Ineffective leadership may start with the dismissal or ignorance of institutional values. Values are vital to the successful operation of any library. Values are responsive to legitimate purposes essential to the maintenance, adaptability, and thriving of the library that individuals are expected to operationalize and affirm in their behavior.⁷ That is, values are what make libraries effectively responsive to their patrons and create a workplace where the efforts of librarians and library staff proceed in concert to best serve the patrons and the institution with which the library is affiliated. In a values-based library or institution, the well-documented evils of workplace bullying and dysfunction should not occur.^{8,9} Among the ways administrators and managers demonstrate that they adhere to negative values are by engaging in public humiliations, and delaying or simply not making decisions. Other demonstrations of negative institutional values are a consistent and deliberate lack of punctuality, rude and demeaning comments towards subordinates, and a general unwillingness to delegate. Robert I. Sutton, in his widely reviewed book *The No Asshole Rule*, succinctly defines administrators and managers who stifle institutional success by noting that the target of the institutional "asshole" will feel "oppressed, humiliated, de-energized, or belittled" after an encounter with this manager.¹⁰ Notably, Dr. Sutton observes that this manager almost always "aims his or her venom at people who are *less powerful* rather than at those people who are more powerful."¹¹ In a values-based library, all employees are treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their organizational rank or position.

Adherence to the negative values described above as a means of controlling the operations of the library are clear indications of the presence of ineffective leadership. Not surprisingly, ineffective leaders claim they do not have negative values, although their actions often suggest otherwise. Effective leaders are aware that ethical standards must be maintained for the proper and effective operation of the library. Ethics have been described as "the study and practice of appropriate ('What should I do?') and inappropriate ('What should I not do?') actions".¹² Sadly, ethical behavior in libraries sometimes falls short as administrators find themselves battling internal and external pressures and competing expectations of "doing the right thing". To be professionally ethical, the library administrator should have an understanding of the context of the various communities in which the library is situated. Most universities have institutional ethics statements, and there are also professional ethics such as those published by The

American Library Association (ALA). The ALA Code of Ethics states that “Ethical dilemmas occur when values are in conflict.”¹³ There are many unfortunate issues that arise when people and institutions are faced with conflicting values. Too often, the personal values and goals of library administrators may be in conflict with those of their institutions. The unwillingness and/or inability to reconcile these conflicts can result in indicators of the presence of ineffective leadership.

The inflexibility and control issues that are the hallmarks of micromanagement that lead to a rigid and unresponsive library are a frequent symptom of ineffective leadership. Much has been written about micromanagers and the persistent insecurity and incompetence that leads to unfortunate micromanaging tendencies.^{14 15} It has been observed that “micromanagers make up for their total lack of imagination by deflating ideas and creating chaos over minutiae....they are control freaks whose tools are pronouncements, policies, demands and dictums. They manage by memorandum.”¹⁶

For the problems of micromanaging to begin to be resolved, the interests of all stakeholders in the library need to be recognized and addressed. An unwillingness to involve stakeholders in decision making may be another strong indication of ineffective leadership. Library stakeholders are those that have an interest in the efficient and effective operation of the library. In an academic library, these include internal stakeholders, i.e., librarians and library staff and administrators, and external stakeholders, which include students, faculty, and non-library campus administrators and staff. This list of external stakeholders can be expanded to include alumni, the Board of Trustees, current and future donors, and those community members that support the library and university. Certainly, library management problems have an effect on all of these stakeholders. In his seminal book on stakeholder theory, R. Edward Freeman emphasizes the need to strategize the “changing of the transaction process” to properly assess stakeholder interaction.¹⁷ Efforts must be made to include the perspectives of as many stakeholders as possible when strategizing about the effective operation of the library. This will always be an ongoing process, and is essential to the successful operation of the library. Unilateral decisions or decisions made that ignore the input of stakeholders are rarely effective or sustainable because the stakeholders have not bought in to or had a voice in the changes to be made.

Since it is often difficult to engage external stakeholders in the process of library assessment, it is essential to first engage the internal stakeholders in the assessment process. In academic libraries, the ethics and values of the university are essential factors in effective assessment, and should be applied to the library (as well as other organizations on campus) as a way to begin to determine if the library administration is in harmony with institutional values. It has been observed that “libraries cannot thrive without aligning their workings directly to the core mission of their host institutions.”¹⁸ The assessment process should determine if library administrators are thinking about the perspective of the various stakeholders when setting policy and making decisions. The inability or unwillingness to involve stakeholders in decisions regarding the operation of the library is indicative of ineffective leadership because it shows a disregard of the talents, experience, and knowledge that internal and external stakeholders can bring to bear on the complex decisions and well thought out policies necessary for the effective

and efficient operation of the library. Ignoring stakeholder input is an indication of moral disengagement and a disregard and/or contempt for institutional values.

Moral disengagement is perhaps the most telling indication of ineffective leadership. Treating people with respect rather than contempt is indicative of moral consciousness and is a reflection on the institution. Sutton writes of the effects of “morally disengaged” managers who participate in, allow and even encourage insensitivity and teasing.¹⁹ Sutton believes this unpleasantness is contagious, and if unchecked, will spread throughout the organization and the institution. Most institutions have value statements or guidelines that are designed to prevent the type of behavior that is represented by moral disengagement. For these value statements to be effective, they must be enforced at the highest levels of institutional administration and acknowledged and supported by institutional stakeholders. Both the perpetrators and the victims of workplace oppression and humiliation must believe that this type of behavior will not be tolerated and that there will be real and effective consequences for those that violate institutional values and policies. It is essential that effective leaders regularly and objectively evaluate the moral state of the library.

The unwillingness or inability to think institutionally is a trait frequently present in ineffective leaders. It is important to remember that libraries are institutions who have a responsibility to the larger institutions or constituencies that they serve. Libraries, particularly academic libraries that are part of a university and academic community, should align themselves to reflect the values and morals of their affiliated institutions. In his 2008 essay *On Thinking Institutionally*, preeminent social scientist Hugh Heclo outlines an argument that addresses those within institutions, calling on them to be “committed to the ends for which organization occurs rather than to an organization as such.”²⁰ For Heclo, thinking institutionally requires a “moral quality”²¹ that goes beyond professionalism. Although there are several ways to administer or manage a given situation, there should be no question that the moral imperative – doing the right thing and treating people with dignity and respect - should never be in question. For the library administrator or manager, thinking institutionally is more than providing library faculty and staff with incentives to be part of and promote the library. It challenges them to act in the best interests of the library in whatever area they are assigned. One can only behave institutionally if one first begins to think institutionally. Awareness of this perspective is a first step towards improving library management, administration, and function.

Heclo asserts that acting institutionally has three components. *Profession* involves learning and respecting a body of knowledge and aspiring to a professional level of conduct. Librarians do this in many ways, usually with the completion of an MLS/MLIS degree. Each library, or department within a library, may have its own body of knowledge and institutional culture that a library administrator must take the time and effort to learn in order to be seen as a true professional in that institution. Merely completing an ALA-accredited professional degree is not enough. Being hired into an administrative position obligates the new library administrator to learn and absorb that institutional culture. The new library administrator may disagree with the culture or seek to change it, but it is exceedingly difficult to accomplish this without first having a thorough understanding of the institutional culture and history. Secondly, Heclo lists *office*, i.e., a sense of duty that compels a person to accomplish more – often considerably more – for the

institution than that which is listed as a minimum standard, e.g., in a job description. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, is *stewardship*. By accepting stewardship, individuals essentially take on the decisions of past members on trust, act in the interests of present and future members of the institution, and stand accountable for actions they take on behalf of the institution. Thinking institutionally can be a lonely pursuit, as those that do are often unappreciated and considered naïve. According to Hecló, those that focus on institutional priorities often – indeed expect – to be taken advantage of by those who care little for the institution.²² Thinking institutionally can be difficult but is essential for effective library administration and management.

The efficient and effective – and most importantly, ethical - operation of a library demands that the presence of the ineffective leadership factors listed above be identified, addressed, and resolved. This is most effectively achieved by the focused efforts of library employees exercising their institutional and persuasive powers. By becoming stakeholders in the solution, library employees will find it in their interest to support change and institutional growth. Old and new perspectives from a variety of library units can be blended to create a library paradigm in which everyone has a stake.

Adherence to institutional values, ethical behavior, involvement of stakeholders in decisions, and the conscious effort to engage in institutional thinking are hallmarks of successful library administration and management. Too often the elements listed above are ignored, resulting in the malaise of micromanagement and the steady deterioration of library morale. Article V of the *Code of Ethics of the American Library Association* states “We treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions.”²³ Surveys have been conducted revealing that “library administrators generally lack discussions of applied management ethics or organizational ethics.”²⁴ In an era where the function of libraries is rapidly changing and being questioned, it is imperative that ethical leadership in libraries be at the forefront of institutional concerns. Libraries will be ill-prepared to meet the challenges that face them while struggling under the yoke of ineffective leadership. Defining and recognizing the presence of ineffective leadership in libraries is essential if quality library services are to be provided. At some point in their careers, most librarians will find themselves working with people they perceive to be ineffective leaders. This article identifies many of the ways this is defined, which is a first step toward reconciling the problems that are inherent with ineffective leaders. The challenge is to apply positive strategies to confront and change ineffective leadership for the benefit of all library stakeholders.

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Submitted: 31 August 2011

Peer Reviewed: 1 November 2011

Accepted for Publication: 22 December 2011

Published: 1 February 2012