Engaging Leadership

Choices: You May Make More Than You Realize

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The recent tragedies of the past several months including the Boston Marathon bombing, fertilizer plant explosion in West, Texas, tornadoes in Oklahoma, and train wreck in Canada clearly demonstrate that sometimes events happen over which an individual has no control and one is truly swept along by the laws of chance, hand of god, winds of fate, predestination, etc., depending on one's personal belief system.   However, in terms of job satisfaction, career development, and leadership, individual choice plays a much greater role than many individuals want to acknowledge. Recognizing the choices one has made and accepting the repercussions of them is a significant part of maturing as a leader. This column explores different aspects of choices about one's professional career that individuals may not realize they are making.

UNDERSTANDING CHOICES

In an ideal world, one can make a choice based on personal preference without boundaries or restrictions. Similarly, when faced with multiple possibilities it is a natural desire in making decisions to have a particular option to rise to the top as the obviously best path to choose. However we do not live in an ideal world. In most cases, choices may be limited by an institutional or personal framework. For example, one may really prefer Apple computers but work in an environment that is primarily based on a PC platform.   Another example might be planning a vacation where one has a limited budget and amount of available leave. In the real world, choices are made based on a number of variables and one works to balance desires and available resources for the most rewarding and satisfying result. Similarly, depending on the complexity of the factors influencing the decision identifying the obvious "best" choice may be difficult or even impossible given currently available information. Sometimes, weighing the different options may feel like one is comparing apples and oranges because the pros and cons do not cleanly line up against each other. Similarly, some factors are more important or explicitly curtailed than others. One aspect of weighing the factors in making a choice are anticipating and understanding the possible consequences or fallout that may come as a result of the choice. Even a choice that may appear easy, such as one that appears to align an individual's personal goals with organizational needs, may have hidden costs for the individual in terms of emotional issues. If one has not thought through the implications thoroughly, then one can be left floundering with a looming sense of failure or feeling that the opportunity did not live up to expectations. However, one can reach the position of over-analyzing the "what ifs" to a degree that one is incapable of choosing. The key is not to let the knowledge of possible consequences prevent one from taking action. In this case, one sometimes has to take a deep breath and make a decision, hoping for the best and try to limit the damage and focus on recovery if one has made the wrong choice.

Sometimes individuals are faced with a situation where the alternatives seem so far outside their realm of consideration that they do not perceive actually having a choice. This is a professionally hazardous mindset because it can lead one to think of oneself as powerless or cast in the role of victim, which will undermine one's ability to be professionally successful and seen as a leader. Sometimes this manifests as a passive aggressive conduct or is characterized by blaming others for outcomes. Another aspect of decision-making that can undermine professional development is inappropriately choosing not to act or engage on an issue without understanding and taking ownership for the reason one is choosing inaction. There are definitely times when one should choose to not take-the-field in combat for a professional or personal situation, but it should be done intentionally and be explainable. Someone who is conflict aversive on all issues may not realize how poorly it reflects on how they are perceived as a leader or it can lead them to make bad choices on which conflicts they do decide to engage on. In time, these types of choices can lead to negative attitudes of professional dissatisfaction and create self-fulfilling prophecies of poor leadership decisions.

SAYING NO

In the discussion later about making choices in managing one's workload, the article talks about taking on too much from trying to please others. Additionally, sometimes individuals have difficulty choosing to say 'no' because of a perceived hierarchical factor. So many times, I have heard individuals say "of course I have to agree to be on the committee, the Library Director asked me to do it" with emphasis on the term 'Library Director' and totally missing that they were 'asked.' In truth, one can even tell a Library Director 'no' and live to go on to be professionally successful. The key is in why and how one does it, making the act of saying 'no' something of an art. So often when accepting or refusing opportunities, it is more about how one said 'yes' or 'no' than the fact of the actual choice made that will live on in the mind of the person that made the offer.

The key thing to keep in mind is that the person tendering the opportunity believes they are doing something positive for you and/or acting in a way to meet the needs of the organization. Saying 'no' because one is just not interested in the assignment sends a patronizing and criticizing message back to the person that made the offer. It also establishes one as inflexible and positional along the lines of "my way or no way." One should always acknowledge the perceived value of the opportunity presented and take time to consider it. It might be appropriate to ask why one was selected. This can provide a hint as to how invested the administrator sees you in connection to the opportunity. It may be that you just happened to come to mind as a good team player or it may be that you were deliberately and intentionally selected for strategic reasons or somewhere in between. A casual response that you just came to mind indicates less investment than a detailed answer that ties your particular knowledge or skills to the initiative. Along the same line, one should consider possible consequences, taking into account the requester. If one turns down this opportunity will it mean that it might be a long time before another opportunity will come along, or conversely is one frequently asked to serve on initiatives as a routine go-to person. If it is the former then one may want to choose to accept in order to use it as a stepping stone or building block, something that is discussed more later in the section on career development opportunities. If one is often asked to serve, then

turning down the occasional request will probably not have as significant of impact as future opportunities will come along.

Once one has made the choice on whether to accept or decline an opportunity or request, one should think about the best way to communicate the decision. If one is accepting the appointment, then one should send a perception of being positively engaged and enthusiastic. A lukewarm response of "well, I guess I can try it" or "If you cannot find anyone else" does not send a message that you are engaged and will be effective. Similarly, turning it down with an "are you crazy? I wouldn't want headache under any circumstances" or "you couldn't pay me enough to do that" comes across offensive and paints a picture in rash ingratitude. Instead, one should take the time to give good reasons for turning something down and lay out one's decision making reasoning. Instead of I'm "overloaded or overwhelmed with too much on my plate" explain calmly, "I'm flattered to be asked but I am already on 7 other committees that are occupying a huge amount of my time (being precise on the time commitments if possible) and I'm not sure I can do justice to this appointment." In some cases, one may actually be wanting to do a negotiated 'yes' that takes on the new responsibility but gets agreement from administrators for something else to be set aside or given a lower priority. In this case one can indicate interest and willingness but concern that you will be able to provide the attention the appointment deserves and ask for assistance or suggestions in what can be given a lower priority. It is important to recognize that this is a negotiation and one may have to be flexible on some occasions and take the long term perspective. Even if it is not something you really want to do, if the administrator lays out compelling reasons you were selected and seems strongly committed to your participation the better choice may be to accept it. In the end, the cost to the relationship in turning it down or negative impact on future opportunities may be greater than you want to incur.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

It surprises me when I enter into conversations with librarians new to the profession and they indicate with surety that they wish to be a library manager or director in a fairly short timeline. While it is not bad to have aspirational goals, it is generally impossible to understand at that point what being an administrator entails and the skills that must be developed in order to be successful in a major administrative role. The exception to this may be someone coming into the field as a later-in-life, second or third career who already has managerial experience, but this is not the typical scenario. In large organizations with multiple hierarchical layers, it is risky to skips layers or move up too rapidly because it can leave one without necessary skill-building experience. In truth, while one may be presented with an initial leadership opportunity in a serendipitous or unexpected manner, one needs to be intentional and deliberate in choosing subsequent career development opportunities in order to acquire the skills to be a good and successful leader or administrator. Usually this will be an evolving process where experience and opportunity drive the development cycles.

If one is interested in wading into the managerial and administrators end of the pool, it is important to initiate skill development and indicate the interest to others that can help make it happen. This may be one's own management hierarchy or a general career development

officer or mentor. The key is that one generally needs to choose development opportunities which build skills that are not immediately related to the practice of librarianship, but rather focus on enhancing communication, conflict engagement, situational decision-making, and political skillsets. Another area for intentional development is on hiring and supervision, which is often guided by federal and state laws, and institutional rules. Once one has achieved the first steps into titled management, the learning intensifies as one needs to choose opportunities to learn when faced with challenging management situations. At this point, one also faces challenges as past relationships begin to evolve and respond to the changes in decision making power and thinking from an institutional perspective rather than a personal one.

Even while seeking development opportunities, one still needs to focus on one's day-to-day job responsibilities as well. Sometimes patience is required until an opportunity opens up, so if it sounds like a juggling act then one has an accurate picture. Additionally, the occasions when individuals are presented with the exact opportunity they want is exceedingly rare. It is more likely that one's career will follow a winding path typified by the choice the character faces in the Robert Frost poem of "Two Roads Diverged in a Yellow Wood." In truth one may have choose to take an indirect path to an eventual goal because of choices made in context of environment factors or personal limitations. This path might require one move to a different library, to go into a different area of specialization than expected, or to take a slower pace on that winding path. But willingness to try a different path or be patient with organizational bureaucracy is an important indicator of the flexibility and adaptability needed by successful leaders and administrators. That said, when presented with an opportunity that feels like a detour, one may want to explore a limited-term approach to the particular opportunity that negotiates a dignified step down or includes language that leaves the door open for future opportunities that may develop which are more in keeping to where one wants to go. Another aspect of this is where one thinks one does want to move into a managerial or administrative role and has the desired skills but other administrators have reservations. If one is truly interested, then one needs to be open to feedback and be willing to change one's perspective to be in alignment with the administrative viewpoint and demonstrate these changes in incremental steps. Again it is a choice one makes of where the lines are between maintaining those viewpoints that are important to one and changing to be a part of the institutional priorities and focus.

Thus far this section has spoken to a development model that presumes one is interested in management and administration. And in truth, many leaders tend to assume this is an appropriate path for talented and successful librarians. However, suppose one becomes a manager or administrator and either immediately or over a long period of time discovers professional misery rather than professional satisfaction? In fact one can be discover one really does not like or want to be in a formal leadership role as a manager or administrator. I know of several peers who have found this to be the case, including my own spouse. Some individuals will use a delaying tactic of crediting the frustration to a particular scenario, situation, or employee, but ultimately one comes back to the sometimes difficult realization that one is not happy in or suited to the position. In this scenario, it is easy to fall into a trapped perspective of feeling that one is stuck and does not have a choice. But this is decision-avoidance thinking, in truth one does have a choice, but there may be factors that have to be considered such as timing and available of a non-management position to move into and financial impact of a salary

reduction. Similarly, from an emotional perspective, the choice may not be an easy one as it forces one to acknowledge one has made a mistake and may have to reconsider one's goals and dreams in finding a new path to follow. Also, there may be perceived personal costs in terms of status, respect, trust, etc. of one's peers along with the challenge of finding a good step-down position. But success can be achieved at many different levels and roles within the profession and choosing a path that will lead to professional satisfaction is key to long term personal satisfactoin.

In leaving this section, I want to make a few comments about salaries. In my observations, salaries seem to be a frequent area where individuals seek to assign the blame for inequity upward to an administrator or institution rather than take ownership of the choices they have made without the realization of having done so. While toxic leadership situations do exist where one may end up black-balled or persona non-grata and be deprived of or given minimal salary increases, it can also be a function of the decisions one has made. Early in my own career, I was "warned" by a senior colleague that if I ever wanted to achieve a "good" salary I was going to have to be willing to move around. Otherwise, I was going to need to pretend I was willing to move and play the application, interview, retention counteroffer game and to never to say I was committed to staying somewhere long term. In time I have learned that this "advice" was accurate to some degree because annual merit and/or cost-of-living increases will generally not keep track with market competitive salaries. But, I have also realized that the manner in which it was stated was wrong in that it implied there was not a choice. In truth, there was a choice. The choice I made was to openly commit to staying at Texas A&M University to be close to my family and accept the possibility that I would be caught in salary compression and probably have fewer opportunities for bumping my salary upward. I have always openly said to my administration that if I am interviewing, then you will know I have already half decided to leave. On occasions, my salary has languished behind newer managers who have come in with higher salaries than mine, which was not necessarily pleasant.   However, this was the consequences of what was the right choice for me because I was not comfortable with the pseudo-counteroffer strategy. It did not fit with my personal value system and I saw it as a disservice to my own institution and abusing the other institution as well. I also found that by making the choice I was freed to focus on other value parameters and not get swept up in the "can you believe what he/she is making" dramas that seemed to sweep through any organization every few years as starting salaries are increased or a particularly talented individual is recruited. Over the long haul, I have come out fine as I have received some equity adjustments as my contributions were valued and the greater inequities were recognized and had a few opportunities to negotiate an increase based on taking on new responsibilities.

Along the same line, it is a fact that an administrator will receive a higher salary than a front line librarian.   Similarly a librarian with a set of needed skills, such as additional degrees or certifications in an area or specialized experience in a hot area, will make more than a generalist. That said, just because it might mean one could get a higher salary by choosing a manager or specialist role, doing so without considering the other aspects and expectations of the position is a bad idea. Not everyone is cut out to be a manager or specialist or you may not be as good of fit for a position as you think you would be. It is important to realize that there is more to being a successful professional in the role one has chosen to occupy than the salary.

Choosing to pursue a particular professional path for the wrong reason is not career development and will not lead to true happiness or success, no matter how much one is paid. Similarly being envious or jealous of those who have chosen an alternate path more successfully prevents individuals from appreciating what they already have and recognizing the impact of the path they have chosen.

WE ALL MAKE CHOICES ALL THE TIME

Finally, in thinking about how everyone makes decisions, regardless of one's leadership roles or responsibilities, one only has to look to one's day-to-day responsibilities. One aspect of making choices that I repeatedly see librarians currently struggling with is the increasingly multi-dimensional nature of their positions and their workload coupled with an expectation that one can do it all at an exemplary level. If one looks back at older job postings, one sees somewhat "standard" titles of Reference Librarian, Bibliographer (for collection development responsibilities), Cataloger, etc., and the scope was rather straightforward and boilerplate with cross-institutional similarities. In the current environment, positions vary widely in title and responsibilities but regularly include a variety of duties, as well as teamwork, leadership, and development expectations. Do the older advertisements reflect a simpler time then where we were faced with fewer complexities and a slower pace? Yes. Was it the idyllic environment represented by those who view the past through rose colored glasses? No. There were plenty of stressors inhibiting one in being successful but they were different ones than what we face today.

One particular stressor associated with these emerging specialized and multi-faceted positions, which often address new initiatives, is that it can be more difficult to define and manage workload. In truth most of us have jobs that can easily run to well over 40 hours/week if we let them and managing one's workload is all about making choices and balancing multiple competing priorities. Unfortunately, I have observed that many entry level librarians and new leaders have trouble making an intentional choice to set something aside do it later or not do it at all. Generally, leaders who do not understand how to appropriately prioritize for themselves also struggle in setting priorities for those reporting to them through a supervisory or team model. Ultimately, for the individual this can lead to poor balance in one's work and personal lives, neglecting one's health needs, and even to professional burnout. Unfortunately, a leader who cannot prioritize will also have a negative effect on those they lead. This includes setting unrealistic expectations that can lead employees to feel they must choose between being seen as successful in their jobs or maintaining a positive, healthy balance in their lives. It will usually lead to higher levels of turnover among talented employees as they do not feel supported.

Based on my observations and discussions with others, the overload model seems to evolve based on a couple of different scenarios or triggers, all keyed around an aspect of making choices. One scenario represents the first time a person has encountered more on their plate than can be accomplished within an appropriate amount of time. In this case, continuing education through reading about or developing tools and skills for managing multiple priorities may be all that is needed for individual success. A more problematic scenario occurs when the individuals may have always tended to be high achievers or have perfectionist tendencies and

cannot bring themselves to assign anything to a lower priority as it equates to a personal sense of failure. The profession of librarianship has tended to attract committed, detail-oriented individuals who focus on principles and greater good. That said, very seldom will someone's life hang in the balance if a task is not done immediately; of course the exception can be a patient care search conducted by a medical library. But for most of us in positions of making information resources available and helping library users find and access information they need to use, whether through a reference transaction, cataloging a book, or creating an online guide, a delay until tomorrow will not result in a world crisis.

In another scenario, an individual may encounter a situation where their own priorities may be out of sync with the organizational priorities. In this situation, the individual has often attached emotion and passion to "their" priorities and letting go to engage on something that has more administrative emphasis triggers an emotional sense of loss and they simply cannot make the deliberate choice to do so. Another scenario that can develop is when individuals place so much value on pleasing and meeting the expectations of others that they overcommit by constantly adding to their workload whenever asked without even considering the possibility of saying no. Because these are all keyed to emotional and value centered responses, individuals may slip into the overcommitted pattern without conscious recognition of having actually made a choice about their workload. For these individuals, recognizing their own role in being overwhelmed by their workload may be the hardest part of changing the model. Even if they recognize that they have contributed to the situation, it may take intervention by a manager and/or professional counseling to change the pattern because it is a deeply embedded part of their professional identity and personal value system. In some cases, the realization of a need to change will be triggered by a crisis, either professional or personal that prompts the individuals to take a hard look at themselves and their priorities. In others, they will simply never quite reach their potential as leaders because of being caught in a loop of trying to do it all and blame the organization or administration for their dissatisfaction, never realizing it was personal choice that provided a solution.

CHOOSING SATISFACTION

When I interact with librarians at other institutions and at conferences there seem to be a lot of very unhappy individuals more than willing to tell me about the unpleasant issues in their own workplace. Some are very real problematic issues without easy or pain-free solutions, but others are a predictable and expected consequence of choosing to follow a particular path or take a particular action. I have also noticed that as I may try to offer possible solutions, they are rebuffed as not being the suggested option the individual wants to hear. In some ways these individuals have made choices that contribute to their being unhappy and professionally dissatisfied, yet they still resent the circumstanced that limited the choice for a variety of reasons. Undoubtedly this is due in part to the fact that their ideal choice was not actually an option and was limited by real life demands. Making choices when all outcomes fall short of a desired result is not easy, and it is not my intention to suggest that it is. But doing so or recognizing that one has already made a decision, even if subconscious at the time, actually empowers one to take better control of one's future and more likely to find a level of personal and professional satisfaction.

In closing, I'd like to remind readers of the secular phrases of the Serenity Prayer attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr and which I find very useful in making choices both in the workplace and in choosing to seek satisfaction in other aspects of my life…

"…grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

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