

Moral Leadership: Shared Accountability for Staff Growth & Development

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Introduction

Would any manager hire an entry-level employee with the promise of a guaranteed lifetime job? Most likely not, and this is seldom a consideration as studies show that the average person will hold 11.7 jobs between the ages of 18 and 48¹. In comparison to that unstable and unattractive national snapshot – in our universities many of our libraries are chockfull of Millennials and Gen Xer staff who have 5-20 years invested in our institutions with no obvious path for advancement or even the promise of increasingly interesting work to keep them engaged and contributing employees until they reach retirement. At the same time, university libraries are suffering under the consequences of weaker budgets and a cut back on staffing; partially due to more expensive, digitized content and the ongoing primacy of automation supplanting library jobs. This is a well-documented phenomenon over the 50-year computerization trajectory in libraries – where punch cards and computers are proven to be more efficient than human beings for routine tasks.

This article is meant to encourage more of us to have uncomfortable conversations with our current, well-performing staff and to let them know, openly and honestly, how at risk their positions may be for stagnation and/or job loss. We must lead our library staff in developing a focus on new roles and skills that can improve their career trajectory and the library's talent pool.

Employment

Until recently, employees of university libraries felt secure in their role as a member of the knowledge industry and in how they differentiated themselves from blue collar workers. After all, attending college was seen as an inoculation from job stealing robots². But a comprehensive look at changing library technologies proves that we've been in a deep denial and that the drums of job annihilating technology are beating ever closer. I recently read a short eBook by Carl Frey and Michael Osborne, titled "*The Future of Employment: how susceptible are jobs to*

*computerization?*³ that called me to action in support of our library staff and the unending churn of lost or dead-end jobs. In this well documented book the authors specified jobs that are susceptible to automation. They “examined expected impacts of future computerization on US labor market outcomes, with the primary objective of analyzing the number of jobs at risk and the relationship between an occupation’s probability of computerization (pg. 47).”

Their research is based on task measures from the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT) successor, O*NET – an online service developed for the US Department of Labor. When the authors applied their criteria to library jobs, they found a .95 probability that Library Clerical Assistants will be automated out of a job and a .99 probability that Library Technicians are at risk. Lest you feel this is a pink-collar bias, umpires, referees and other sports officials also have a .98 probability of their positions being automated.

Likewise, we have fewer employment guarantees in today’s libraries compared to 15 years ago. Just look at any half-empty cataloging and acquisitions department. As an industry we took great pride in automating early and often; think about early punch cards, OCLC, and the OPAC. The time and staff savings were applied to other priorities with positions often not being refilled when a retirement came about.

It feels different now. Technology is moving faster and university budgets are pushing for aggressive cost savings. The workflows of some staff and librarians are at risk of being fully automated at the same time that fewer items are checked out; circulation being one of our accepted proofs of the necessity of libraries. A common reality is that we find ourselves with some staff whose work could be sourced to computers. That solution leaves us in a quandary as we are not able to retrain all staff to the level where they are capable of picking up the higher-level responsibilities; thus their jobs are at risk and they also hold the library back.

One could say that repetitive and reproducible work should be automated, that we all deserve interesting assignments that we are passionate about, and that it is time to recognize that most of the new tasks we are hiring for require technical knowledge and a critical approach. But acknowledging this need does not solve the quandary of what to do with staff who are 5 to 20 years into their career and may not have a secure path to retirement.

There are jobs out there for data librarians, digital humanities specialists with a strong coding expertise, assessment and instruction skills, and luckily – we are still hiring for people with strong inter-personal and high EQ skills who can work with the public. But many technical

positions are well above the abilities of some less-skilled staff and even librarians. So, what does this mean for us as leaders and managers? What can we do to guide our current staff to make the difficult but necessary life and career decisions that will allow them to be viable in an ever-changing workplace?

Transformational Leadership

I believe that one approach in changing the conversation is to engage in Transformational Leadership. Unlike authoritarian or transactional leadership; which focus on hierarchy, organization, and performance -- transformational leadership works with library staff to identify needed change, creating a vision, and executing the change in tandem with our organization.

I'm going to delve lightly into Transformational Leadership and then focus on how a successful application of this practice can assist us in engaging with our staff in significant conversations about their future, and their own personal responsibility in regards to their career viability.

The characteristics of a transformational leader include:

- Charisma
- Inspiration
- Intellectual Stimulation
- Individualized Consideration

As a transformational leader, you bring your best self to work and ask the same of others. You become the leader who celebrates higher education as a calling. You tie the work of the library to that of the university and its ability to educate students and broaden their intellectual horizons, raise their earning potential, and build critical thinking skills.

If you build an aligned agreement of values between yourself and your staff, it is then easier to touch their hearts and minds. This alignment is not only necessary to build a functionally and emotionally strong library – it is also a necessary step that allows librarians and staff to examine their own values and priorities in line with their expressed hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

According to James MacGregor Burns and Bernard Bass, Transformational Leadership is a moral and motivational style. The practice of Transformational Leadership is one of positive

expectations. As a result, Transformational Leaders inspire, empower, and stimulate staff to exceed normal levels of performance. Transformational Leaders also focus on and care about employees and their personal needs and development.

My experience, coming of professional age in libraries, has been one of loving mentorship and honest critical conversations. Having bosses who pushed me into uncomfortable roles helped me grow and become a more thoughtful leader. Their overt belief in me gave me confidence. The time and assessment I received was a gift that changed the trajectory of my career.

When we create a moral environment - where we take responsibility for one-another, be our authentic selves, and be accessible leaders - we gain trust. This is necessary if you want to be a leader who grows the skills and knowledge of your staff. This may include directing them into degree programs or other careers where they have a greater chance of long-term success.

The Conversation

My personal beliefs emphasize our sense of responsibility to one another. In fact, one of the values of Sacramento State University Library is: **A culture of communication, honesty, respect, and trust.** To me, this means that I am duty bound to have difficult conversations with staff and librarians about their futures – even when they are not comfortable having this scary conversation.

When I have one-on-one talks with librarians or staff I inevitably ask where they want to be in 5-10 years. In our library, 90% of the support staff are former student employees. These employees stepped onto a very short career-escalator and when asked about future plans often say they are “just taking a break from undergrad”, “waiting for the kids to get a bit older,” “need to pay off a few bills”. The evidence in my library proves that library staff, for the most part, are habitual in nature. Few move on, some don’t like change, and all enjoy the perks of a campus environment.

This can be a problem. Going back to the Frey & Osborn paper – there is a 90% or so probability that a significant number of library staff jobs will disappear in 5-15 years. Look around; shared ILS systems allow for shared cataloging, fewer items are put on reserve, media is streamed, and library budgets will get slashed further. If we aren’t talking to our 40 year-old and younger employees about their succession plans, we are doing them a great disservice.

We have the choice of passively not growing our people and holding on to antiquated workflows that keep our libraries from moving forward -- or we actively set our staff on a path where they assume ownership of their career. I begin this conversation in one of two ways; by meeting with staff one-on-one or at opportunistic moments during project or committee work.

Points that I impart:

- All employees have the responsibility to lead from their place within the organization.
- People are responsible for their own growth
 - We are responsible for supporting them in this skill acquisition.
 - This may mean pushing campus benefits (free classes)
 - Allowing for flexible scheduling for classes, informational interviews, internships.
 - We need to allow time for emotional & mental growth
 - A substantial number of library staff are risk averse and may need a push into the very scary & uncomfortable unknown.
 - We should sometimes pony up funds & time
 - When it serves the needs of the library, pay for skills acquisition – even if you know you are providing a pathway to a different job.
- People take up responsibility when they believe in an organization. It is up to you to build a library that celebrates equity, diversity, respect, and transparency
- Important to remember: We don't get the team/skills that we want, we have the team/skills that was hired piecemeal by our predecessors.
 - Not all of our staff will be willing or able to move up and out.
 - Many will resist.
 - In the end, should budgets be slashed and positions automated and removed, you can live with the fact that you presented options.

We are in the midst of a great flux of generational change distrust in organizations. Recent economic history has proven that there is no institution that can give us long-term financial security.

Summation thus far:

- Our work environments are constantly changing and are no longer secure
- Transformational Leadership is a management style that is inclusive, builds trust, and can change individuals and social systems for the better.
- We have a responsibility to our staff / our staff have a responsibility to us -- but their biggest responsibility is to elevate themselves.

Inspirational Leadership and one-on-one interactions (ourselves and our staff) are but a small part of the “how do I grow” conversation. The last proficiency that is key to implementing IL is building high-functioning teams. Effective teams help the library and are an accelerant for successful work processes.

A strong team environment builds trust, participation, cooperation and collaboration – all transferable skills into higher functioning positions. The high emotional intelligence needed to work within a team is not a reproducible computer skill and gives a leg up to our staff. Most importantly, teams allow for people to connect and support one another; which in Transformational Leadership amplifies the positive support staff receive. If you’ve ever been part of a successful team, you know that it is a transformative work experience.

As we often do, let’s look to Google. The tech giant wanted to know how to comprise a successful team. They formed Project Aristotle⁴, reviewed a half-century of teamwork scholarship, and sliced & diced every aspect of their team’s makeup (from who was on time, their traits, lunch habits, and so on).

After years of research and exploration they discovered that all successful teams shared two traits:

1. A high social sensitivity, being careful of one-another’s feelings
2. There was equality in who got to speak

In other words – BE NICE.

I believe that purposefully incorporating and following the tenets of Transformational Leadership, having honest conversations with staff encouraging them to be proactive about their futures, and building a workplace that is consciously positive and ethical will allow us to move staff towards greater career satisfaction by acquiring new skills and taking on new roles.

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References

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. *News Release: Number of Jobs Held, Labor Market Activity, and Earnings Growth Among The Youngest Baby Boomers: Results From A Longitudinal Survey, Chart 1.* Issued March 31, 2015. Available at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/nlsoy.pdf>.

² Martinne Geller and Ben Hirschler, Impact of job-stealing robots a growing concern at Davos. *Reuters*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-davos-meeting-robots/impact-of-job-stealing-robots-a-growing-concern-at-davos-idUSKBN1540H0>

³ Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael A. Osborne, *The Future of Employment: How susceptible are jobs to computerisation?* (Oxford Martin School: University of Oxford Press, 2013), <http://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/publications/view/1314>.

⁴ Charles Duhigg, "What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team." *The New York Times*, February 25, 2016. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html?mcubz=0& r=0>.