

The Power of Empathetic and Collaborative Leadership

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Introduction

Empathetic and collaborative leadership are emerging as essential requirements for library leaders in research libraries today and more generally in higher education. Why are these traits important, desirable, and altogether necessary in today's volatile and competitive environment? This chapter explores empathetic and collaborative leadership in its various dimensions as an increasingly "must have" characteristic of research library leaders.

This paper provides background on the concepts of empathetic and collaborative leadership. Select areas in which empathetic and collaborative leadership can advance research libraries to become more effective, fair, and equitable environments will be examined. These include, but are not limited to, organizational structure, diversity and inclusion efforts, recruitment, orientation, fundraising, internal meetings, professional meetings, and effective stakeholder interaction

Empathetic and Collaborative Leadership

Empathetic leadership is defined by the *Financial Times* as "the ability of leaders to understand, relate to and be sensitive to customers, colleagues and communities."¹ According to Wilson and Foltz "empathy is recognizing and understanding the feelings, motives, and situations of others and being sensitive to these."² It is important to note that not everyone understands what empathetic leadership means. For example, I spoke with an applicant for a librarian position and emphasized our desire for the successful candidate to exhibit empathetic leadership. The applicant had no idea what was meant by the phrase "empathetic leadership." In trying to explain I realized that it might be easier to relate what it is NOT. The opposite of empathetic leadership is arrogant, self-centered, and egotistical leadership. The empathetic leader, by contrast, is sharply focused on the success of the library and its stakeholders. The arrogant leader is sharply focused on how decisions and activities benefit his or her career.

Another description of opposition to empathy is narcissism which includes traits such as a strong sense of superiority, a drive to dominate one's environments, a high degree of restlessness, and a strong need for attention and recognition.³ Chatterjee and Hambrick note that "highly narcissistic CEOs --- defined as those who have very inflated self-views continuously reinforced -- can be expected to engage in behaviors that have major consequences, not only for the individuals who interact directly with them, but also for broader sets of stakeholders."⁴

Collaborative leadership exquisitely pairs with empathetic leadership in that it leverages a broad base of expertise across, not only the library, but the institution and beyond. Successful collaborative leaders have an empathetic streak because they are able to see the benefit in working with others. Arrogant leaders, while they might use others to their own benefit, do not believe that they need partners to succeed. True collaborative leadership can be examined as it relates to a collaborative effort or as it plays out in leadership that might shift in a group depending on talents needed to meet goals.

Together empathetic and collaborative leadership form a powerful way of leading a multidimensional organization such as a research library embedded within a larger higher

education environment. Pairing the two is ideal in an environment where all disciplines and multidisciplinary areas are supported. However, challenges to successful implementation of this approach include perceived time constraints, turf, competition, aversion to conflict, and old habits.

Interestingly leadership styles need to address differences in the higher education environment. Effectively leading academic professionals is not always about showing them the way or telling them what to do or how to do it but working more collaboratively towards a common goal. Davidson, a highly respected psychologist, considers that the greatest care and service-orientation is required to help these highly expert and bright individuals stay on target.⁵ Suggestions for leaders include listening deeply, verify understanding of the other person, show respect and willingness to help, and be authentic and open.⁶

Empathetic leadership is not always directive but includes encouragement for others to help lead the way. In fact there are growing voices speaking about radical empathy or working very hard to extend empathy to people or groups where it seems difficult or strange to do so. Karnofsky puts forward three principles to support the notion of radical empathy. These include:

- Not quickly dismissing arguments that seem strange or even laughable
- Supporting deeper analysis
- Not limiting ourselves to conventional problems⁷

Radical empathy is congruent with an academic environment valuing openness, innovative, and novel ways of problem-solving. Thinking outside of the box perspectives thrive on this type of approach.

Downsides of Empathy and Collaborative Leadership

There are perceived (by some) dangers of being an empathetic leader and some call into question the notion of empathy in and of itself. A few of these dangers include poor judgement benefiting the few over the many, damaging diversity efforts since people naturally empathize with others like themselves, an empathetic approach which is too narrow because of one's band width to empathize with many. Empathy can lead to distress or burnout, and it is fleeting and inconsistent.⁸ However, compassionate people can be balanced, rationale, and forward thinking to avoid these pitfalls.

Empathy and collaboration are sometimes considered to be soft skills. This assertion can come with an erroneous link between empathy and gender. It can also include thoughts on success of dominant leadership with the default being a member of white male society. Libraries are, by definition, much broader than one dominant group making empathy and collaboration even more essential through the organization. However, a real danger of empathetic characteristics lies in the potential tyranny of consensus. Empathy must be tempered with a strategic focus towards the future and, for leaders, the path chosen might not be comfortable for all. Clear and accurate messaging needs to accompany these chosen paths so everyone is aware of the why.

Organizational Structure

Empathy and collaboration should be infused in all aspects of the organization including in its structure and its daily operations. Something so "normal" as an organizational chart focusing on hierarchy rather than on work-related content (and most organizational charts make

this mistake) can send messages of elitism and condescending behavior to staff. Charts are more difficult to fix but creative ways to describe the organization could be considered such as a starburst representation rather than a top down view. Implications that all are not welcome, for example, in the administration offices are antithetical to empathy and collaboration. These issues are difficult ones to overcome. Strategies as basic as arranging for meetings for each and every new librarian and staff member by the director can actually set a caring tone immediately.

Diversity and Inclusion

It turns out that empathy and collaboration play a big part in efforts towards diversity and inclusion. An empathetic approach ensures that other points of view and perspectives are taken into consideration. Collaboration ensures that action actually incorporates a diverse set of expectations and desires. Action items become more inclusive and based on more comprehensive knowledge to the situation and its participants. Empathy and collaboration can help organizations at least partially avoid bias which, according to Ross, occurs “without people realizing they are happening.” He goes on to assert that “human beings are consistently, routinely, and profoundly biased.” Therefore, anything that can be done to mitigate bias is helpful to a great outcome.⁹

Recruitment

Explicit advancement of empathy and collaboration can be a major advantage for recruitment in research libraries. Recently, Penn State Libraries has been engaged in recruiting for a number of leadership positions emphasizing joining “a highly integrated and collaborative organization,”¹⁰ and seeking a “strategic and empathetic visionary...with a commitment to shared governance.” Other postings seen recently articulate characteristics of the organization, itself including a “diverse, dynamic, and collegial atmosphere” and “a respectful and inclusive educational and workplace environment.”¹¹ Another asks for individuals to develop partnerships within and beyond campus boundaries and under requirements asks for “proven ability to work both independently and collaboratively as part of a team.”¹² These kind of statements including many more related to commitment to diversity and inclusion are being more common on job descriptions. Hallway conversations indicate that such content supports positive reaction from readers and actual applicants.

Orientation

Empathy and collaboration are also important components of effective onboarding programs. Working together to create group-based and individual customized orientation programs results in good will and better trained staff. Features, such as individual meetings with library leadership, go a long way to incorporating empathetic and collaborative qualities throughout the organization, not just at the top. Direct access to caring and interested leadership also mitigates some of the rankism that is endemic in higher education, including research libraries, where professional/faculty librarians are seen as looking down on rank and file staff. Orientation group programs including librarians and staff at all levels are also effective ways to promote collaboration and empathy.

Fundraising

The relationship between fundraising and empathy is a “no brainer.” The hallmarks of great fundraisers include superior listening skills leading to deep insight into donor interests and motivations. Great fundraisers are well versed in donor perspectives related to race and gender.

Loehr details in *Gender Matters: A Guide to Growing Women's Philanthropy* important characteristics of giving by women and how to leverage these characteristics for greater outcomes.¹³ Libraries' emphasis on collections and accompanying services and programs supporting the preservation of scholarship in race, gender, and culture, can have a positive impact on peaking interest in philanthropy by people who previously were not considered as potential fundraising sources.

The most successful fundraising efforts rise from collaborations and partnerships between the development team and library management and key staff. The knowledge that what seems to be a small act of kindness by any library staff towards potential library donors (i.e. anyone using the library) can result later on in a large gift and plenty of good will. Added to this is strong collaboration between fundraisers aligned with a variety of colleges and departments and between fundraisers specializing in certain types of "asks" (annual giving, major gifts, specialized campaigns, etc.). Empathy is important, too, between all collaborators and stakeholders because each fundraising specialty has important differences in their perspectives and methodologies.

Internal Meetings

Empathy and collaboration are also important components of library meetings of all types. At the local level library administrators or others running meetings should make a concerted effort to truly involve all participants. The not so recent publication, *Team Power: Making Library Meetings Work*, co-edited by this author and Sheila D. Creth, included timeless factors such as:

- Articulating meeting expectations that participants are to work collaboratively and view themselves as a team
- Rewarding group accomplishments
- Beginning each meeting with a statement that participants will share responsibility for the quality and outcomes of the meetings
- Rotating responsibility for chairing or facilitating meetings¹⁴

Professional Meetings

Professional meetings sponsored by regional, national, or international library organizations are also important venues for empathetic and collaborative behavior. A major goal should be to make all attendees, particularly those new to the group or organization, feel welcome. Cliquish and elitist behavior where only those of a certain "group" sit together or are called on to speak at the meetings should be avoided at all costs. Participants should make a special effort to reach out to newer members and get to know them. Also, new members should do the same because sometimes those veteran members of a group start to feel left out if their numbers are dwindling. Attention to these behaviors will result in better and more productive professional meetings which will be sustained over time since all are participating. As professional groups become more diverse in all ways it becomes even more essential to exhibit empathy and collaboration.

Focus on Stakeholders

Librarians pride themselves in approaching work with a user-centered focus. What does this mean in the context of empathy and collaboration for different stakeholders? Students are

certainly front and center for academic librarians. An empathetic and collaborative approach is to include them in key decision areas such as space and services reconfiguration. Special student advisory groups sometimes work well for this purpose. Likewise faculty are, not only key stakeholders, but important partners in the educational process. Both faculty and librarians should also include student input into plans forming a powerful triangle of co-creation in the educational mission. Faculty need to know that their goals and objectives are front and center of the collaboration. Empathy with this important group focuses on keen listening and analytical skills resulting in excellent plans moving forward. Of course staff are the engines that operate and advance our libraries. They need tremendous empathy and a change to collaborate.

Conclusion

Employing empathetic and collaborative leadership is a “must do” in research library environments today. These traits never go out of style and, indeed, are becoming more prominent and desirable in today’s leaders. Empathy combined with great skill and determination to build and nurture partnerships are keys to success in research libraries and higher education today. Integration into all aspects of the organization and beyond is not only doable by library leaders at all levels, but essential for success in the mid-21st century. The empathetic and collaborative leader as well as librarians and staff will advance, not only the library, but the institution and the profession into the future.

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⁹ Howard J. Ross. *Everyday Bias: Identifying and Navigating Unconscious Judgments in Our Daily Lives*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014: p.xi.

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¹² Cornell University Library. Associate University Librarian (position announcement), Fall 2018.

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¹⁴ Barbara I. Dewey and Sheila D. Creth. *Team Power: Making Library Meetings Work*, (Chicago: American Library Association) 1993, 34.