

## Academic Library Leadership Lessons from COVID-19

Nadine Newman

### Introduction

The role of a leader can be challenging even under normal circumstances. A pandemic crisis adds so much more difficulty to the job as the leadership has to do a balancing act of considering the personal, departmental, and institutional values. The upheaval to business as usual including the displacement of students, the transition to online and the exposure of institutional deficiencies plus the revelation of leadership strengths and weaknesses, can complicate things for any leader (Lagowska et al. 2020, 1). The skillsets that make a library leader effective under normal circumstances could very well serve as impairments in a time of crisis because many lack the abilities, experience, and knowledge necessary to guide their library through crisis events.

On March 10, 2020 the first case of the coronavirus was reported in Jamaica. Consequently, all academic institutions including libraries were closed. A nationwide lockdown was announced on March 13, 2020 and nine months later, the country was still on a partial lockdown. For all educational institutions, the decision to pivot to online engagements was a necessary task with the uncertainty of how long the pandemic would last. At the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona Campus, the rapid move to remote and online teaching began on April 14, 2020, a mere month after the initial lockdown. All of the libraries at the Mona Campus responded to the COVID-19 crisis and started planning to support online education and to get connected with faculty members and students.

At the Norman Girvan Documentation Centre (NGDC), a specialized graduate information centre, the surge of online classes offered the library leadership numerous challenges and opportunities. The leadership was thrust into uncharted waters which forced them to make unprecedented decisions. Successes and failures along the way brought to light the critical role that leaders play in dealing with unexpected events threatening the existence of the library. This article outlines some of the key library leadership lessons drawn from the experiences over the last thirteen months at the NGDC. It offers the view of a library leader from the proverbial trenches and many of the issues and lessons observed would apply not only to academic libraries in the Caribbean but also in other parts of the world. The possibility of a potential crisis, a hurricane, earthquake, or another COVID-19 induced shutdown, makes it imperative for leadership to

engage in active self-reflection and to assess the leadership lessons for effectively navigating the present crisis.

### **Act Quickly and Be Proactive**

Responding quickly to the fast-paced crisis is foremost. The extent of information flowing through the media creates a sense of urgency which the leadership has to take seriously. The health and well-being of staff and students push the leadership to make decisions and to communicate those decisions within a small timeframe. Fear of making the wrong decisions and anxiety over the impact of those decisions can cause leadership to delay action and to downplay the threat until the situation becomes clearer (Stoller 2020, 78). In a crisis, especially in the face of a pandemic with an aggressive growth rate, delaying and losing time in the vain hope that greater clarity will prove no action is needed is dangerous. If a consequence of acting quickly is making a mistake, then leadership has to take responsibility, acknowledge fallibility but accept the inevitability of making mistakes. The greater risk that each additional day of delay creates an even greater threat helps validate the need to act and then learn from any subsequent mistake.

Anticipatory behaviour coupled with commensurate action is a critical leadership competency during a pandemic. Proactivity is needed well before the crisis occurs, however it's even more needed after the crisis hits. In the early stages of COVID-19, the shortage of gloves, personal protective equipment and sanitization solutions was evident. With the impending possibility of a re-opening whether in one month or three months, the leadership began proactively putting plans into place. Supplies were purchased, a re-opening policy was developed, signs were designed and sanitization areas for return materials were designated. The urgent needs during a pandemic cannot be pushed aside and contingency plans must be developed. Leadership has a choice. We can passively be a spectator, or we can lead others and ourselves out of this devastation.

### **Reset Your Priorities**

It is never easy to prioritize, especially when working in a time of tremendous uncertainty and stress. With a pandemic this becomes even more challenging for the leadership as decisions must consider employees, students, faculty, and other library client's safety more than before and then balance those considerations with operational demand and service requirements. While all stakeholders and commitments are important, the first priority is employee safety. Addressing employees' concerns must be the top priority at every stage of the pandemic as the goal must be to reassure employees and help them feel as safe as possible. But like most leaders, library

leaders probably find themselves grappling with a deeper dilemma, one that extends beyond this immediate priority: what's the best way to meet the needs of your employees and patrons while ensuring your library continues to perform?

The priorities that rise to the forefront will be different at each library, depending on local needs and institutional priorities/values/goals. In the Caribbean and more specifically at the NGDC, one of the immediate priorities was sourcing online resources and e-books. Alongside this was the concerns over budgeting in the long term for the continued maintenance of online databases, digital resources and online resources and other associated costs. Well before the crisis, the library was pursuing a digital transformation programme, but what was a self-paced digital transformation became an urgent priority. Resetting and shifting priorities at least in the short term is important, however as a leader in an unfolding pandemic drama, there is no clear view of the direction or duration of the crisis and continuous review of your priorities is essential.

### **Look for the Opportunities in the Crisis**

Opportunities can be found in the aftermath of a crisis as an organization can re-emerge with a fresh sense of purpose and direction (Gigliotti 2019, 22). This is an opportunity for library leadership who are focused strategic long-term thinkers to create success by using the crisis to redesign the library environment. Under normal circumstances, challenging the top leadership and organizational norms and disrupting the status quo would have proven to be a formidable task. With the pandemic comes the opportunity to leap directly into the fire and eliminate inefficient legacy practices. The fact remains that the disruption caused by the pandemic is only temporary and the leadership can take the opportunity to rethink, reshape, retool, rebuild, and reactivate for the long term. An apt analogy by Guinn (2020) states: "A rubber band stretched is designed to return to its original form, but we can be different and do better. As we are being pulled and stretched in this season, may we "return" having learned valuable lessons and having grown into something better" (16).

The crisis provides an excellent environment for facilitating leadership development and growth. Crisis and other disruptive events, expose leaders to developing new skills via problem solving, enhances their confidence and motivation and helps stimulate leadership identity and development. Of course, the opposite is also true as the crisis can highlight the leadership weaknesses and inability to embrace the opportunity for growth and development. The skillsets which make a leader effective under normal circumstances could very well be an impediment in a time of crisis and highlight the lack of proficiencies and experience. The COVID-19 crisis provided an opportunity for the University as a whole to reconsider if their leadership in all aspects

had the requisite skillsets to manage their departments during the crisis (Stoller 2020, 79). At the NGDC, hard skills, such as programming skills were once prized, now softer, more humane attributes and competencies gained greater value in the wake of the crisis. The crisis provided an opportunity for the library leaders to lead change and to build the competencies, qualities and the resilience to weather this storm while bracing for the next.

### **Establish Collaboration and Shared Leadership**

The pandemic is a serious challenge that can be best addressed by all those impacted working together and through a shared leadership model. A top-down hierarchical approach could therefore not work in the academic context when facing a crisis that is so unpredictable and complex in nature. It is important for the leadership to set the priorities, then leverage the collective knowledge of the staff through the delegation of responsibilities to teams who will have varying roles to play in the implementation of the crisis management strategy (Fernandez 2020, 43).

Just like the virtual leadership, the remote working teams operate in a climate of trust and engage in collaboration, creativity and problem solving. Because of the nature of the current crisis, it is important for team members and leadership to regularly connect virtually to successfully accomplish their roles and to maintain a quality student learning experience through the crisis without major disruption. At the NGDC, staff had to constantly check emails, WhatsApp, use social media, search the online resources and databases, learn Blackboard Collaborate, attend numerous Zoom meetings, and upgrade their knowledge and skills by attending webinars.

Collaboration can be both internal to the institution, such as other departments, and external with companies outside the university to leverage support during the pandemic such as library vendors and other university's libraries. At the NGDC there was also greater need for collaboration via the Library and Information Association of Jamaica (LIAJA) as the library fraternity played a significant role in boosting the librarians resolve to work through the issues they faced. Collaborations usually took the form of Zoom meetings which provided updates on the general library and information sector. These were particularly useful as it allowed for easier decision making and leadership learning about what worked and what didn't in other libraries.

### **Actively Communicate**

Communication is an absolute priority for ensuring that employees are kept up to date with the most important information especially with the plethora of information surfacing on the news media and social media platforms. Regular virtual meetings and phone calls ensured that information was disseminated frequently. The choice of communication channels utilized was a

vital leadership decision as the channel utilized was based on the type of stakeholder, such as employees or students.

Clear communication helps to build trust and a sense of community and reduces anxiety. Field (2020) notes that communication in a crisis is a delicate balancing act as providing too much information may cause you to lose the essence of the message and too little may lead to concern and apprehension. The credibility of the message is important as leadership needs to have the support of employees especially in terms of the achievement of the shared vision for the library. Leadership must communicate how the crisis strategy will link and lead to achievement of goals and vision. All of this must take place in an environment that is constantly evolving. All in all, leadership has to be flexible and have the adaptive capacity for navigating the unpredictable challenges of the crisis.

### **Hone a Strategic Online Presence**

To effectively communicate and reach out to not only stakeholders but to the wider society required a greater use of both the traditional media channels and also social media. Traditional media because it represents a credible source of information and social media for connecting with students, the millennials, who have been a growing community of followers for the library (Eriksson 2018, 532).

Despite the uncertainty of the day-to-day, one thing that remained constant was the importance of your website to perform well and have readily accessible information. Now, more than ever, people are connecting digitally and it's important to not get swallowed up in the noise. The strengthening of the digital services such as online databases and e-books would be useless if the website, they are accessible through, was not capable of handling the information nor have the right search capabilities. The leadership has to ensure that in the optimization of the communication and information technology, the website, the doorway to all information, is fully functional and easily navigable.

At the NGDC, just like at many academic libraries, engaging faculty and students with digital library services has been a challenge. In response to the COVID-19, the library leadership proactively took steps to become embedded into the University's online programmes. Embedded librarians are a great way to provide more consistent and personalized assistance for students. Some of the services included virtual office hours, alerting students to pertinent research for their courses, and teaching new research skills and especially assistance with citation styles. This embedded librarian programme required leadership to engage with Deans, faculty, and the University administration so as to remain relevant but also to assist both faculty and students who

were overwhelmed with adapting to online teaching and learning. These collaborative efforts have helped to build stronger connections between faculty and librarians and improve student engagement.

### **Be Truthful and Positive**

The high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity caused by the crisis can lead to varying interpretations of events and extreme emotional reactions for not just employees and stakeholders but also the leadership. On one hand leaders have to show empathy, support and concern with the human issues and on the other hand focus on the realities and resolve to emerge from the crisis, articulate the resolve and optimistically lead the organization back to normality (Stoller 2020, 78).

All have been affected in different ways by the pandemic and leadership has to play a role in ensuring the healing process throughout and after the crisis. By demonstrating a positive outlook through gratitude to employees for continuation of work and going above the call of duty, which helps to strengthen the bond between employees and the leadership, leaders can improve the long-term relationships and investments for the library. At the NGDC the library leadership took into consideration the personal circumstances of each employee before making decisions that would impact the staff.

These are extraordinary times and it is clear that things will not return to pre-COVID-19 levels any time soon. Social distancing and isolation have made people working from home face a new reality. It can be stressful and confusing for employees due to disruption in routines and the uncertainty of life from both a personal and professional perspective (Cho 2020). Leadership cannot operate on the traditional set of leadership behaviours but must operate on a human level by being sensitive to the needs of all, providing compassion and support and maintaining morale through the crisis.

### **Determining a Path Forward**

The way forward may seem daunting especially where the strategic priorities before the crisis have been completely transformed after the crisis. However, we cannot waste this crisis and the lessons we have learnt. Just like the rubber band that has stretched, it can either return to its original form or change shape and be different. So too leadership has to recalibrate and reassess and use the valuable lessons to make positive, impactful changes for the unknown that lies ahead (Guinn 2020, 16).

These are extraordinary times, and it appears that we will continue to experience further waves of COVID-19 and need to be prepared and draw on the lessons in leadership. The decisions over the last few months, specifically for the university to fully pivot to remote and online learning, were made swiftly. Changes that used to take up to a year or more to implement were up and running within a few weeks. Now it is time to focus and emerge better able to address future crises. The path forward requires leadership to develop a new toolkit of skills and the need for retooling and building resilience.

Library leadership has to put a focus on rewriting library policies and realigning practices for the new circumstances of social distancing and working from home to deal with the current situation. At the NGDC, new policies and protocols included: online library meeting protocol; work from home policy; protocol for the handling of returned library materials and social media policy. These policies were developed and updated during the crisis and served as a form of preparation for the next disruption. These will help to guide the leadership and staff going forward. A continuous review and reassessment of strategic priorities is needed at more regular intervals as the leadership plans ahead even when everything is uncertain. Leadership has to frame a reshaped balanced reality which provides hope, compassion, and empathy as it continues to look for the silver lining in the crisis.

### **Self-reflection**

It is important to take an opportunity to reflect on how the leadership has handled the various dimensions of the crisis. Through an honest self-evaluation, leadership can assess their strengths and areas for improvement. It is also important for the leadership to ask staff to do a self-reflection and come up with themes which they can organize and use in a constructive and meaningful discussion on the way forward. The results of this discussion can inform the future approach to dealing with a crisis.

The pandemic has been a totally new experience for most managers in leadership positions. Some thrived in the new normal while others had a harder time adjusting to the mass of zoom meetings. The period of self-reflection is a time for leadership to regroup their thoughts. The crisis has consumed life and time making the working mode almost continuous and not a sustainable solution for the long term. It takes a lot of effort and endurance and can be exhausting, and leadership needs time to recover.



## Conclusion

The crisis has generated new circumstances and new demands for leadership. In the thirteen-month period of the crisis, leadership has had to ride the waves, making changes after each wave. Starting with the time and energy in new processes and routines to sustaining motivation of employees after the new normal was established. The struggles of leadership were there pre-COVID-19 however the challenges intensified during the crisis. There was no list of “To Do’s” for leadership to consult. It was either to use the crisis as a window of opportunity to make changes or a catastrophe knocking at the door. Choices, changes, and circumstances played a large role in leadership failure or success during the crisis.

While the crisis is a deeply troubling and disorienting moment for the world, the way it is handled and dealt with by leadership makes all the difference. It’s the one moment in time when all eyes are on the leadership. There is no perfect leader, however, using the energy and strength of the impact of the crisis to build resilience is key for success. Leadership has to think “beyond COVID”, remain alert to the possibility that a crisis of this scale can happen again, modify their approach to leadership and build in resilience throughout the organization, even as they manage the constant changes. The good news is that many leaders have developed more confidence in making major changes now and have proven to themselves that they can act quickly because COVID-19 forced them to. An organization that remains relevant and well-positioned during the crisis through well-directed leadership, will take the opportunity to reimagine, reinvent and renew.

## References

- Cho, Eunae. 2020. “Examining Boundaries to Understand the Impact of COVID-19 on Vocational Behaviour.” *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, Vol. 119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2020.103437>
- Eriksson, Mats. 2018. “Lessons for Crisis Communication on Social Media: A Systematic Review of What Research Tells the Practice.” *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, Vol. 12 No. 5, 526-551. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1510405>
- Fernandez, Antonio Arturo and Graham Paul Shaw. 2020. “Academic Leadership in a Time of Crisis: The Coronavirus and COVID-19.” *Journal of Leadership Studies*, Vol. 14 No. 1, 39-45. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21684>
- Field, Kelly. 2020, March 26. “5 Lessons from Campuses that Closed After Natural Disasters.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/5-lessons-from-campus-es-that-closed-after-natural-disasters/>
- Gigliotti, Ralph. 2019. *Crisis Leadership in Higher Education: Theory and Practice*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.



Guinn, Trey. 2020. "Maximize the Moment: Chairs and the Learning Community in Crisis." *The Department Chair*, Vol. 31 No. 1, 15-17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/dch.30331>

Lagowska, Urszula, Filipe Sobral and Liliane Furtado. 2020. "Leadership Under Crisis: A Research Agenda for the Post-COVID-19 Era." *Brazilian Administrative Review*, Vol. 17 No. 2, 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1807-7692bar2020200062>

Stoller, James. 2020. "Reflections on Leadership in the Time of COVID-19." *BMJ Leader*, Vol. 4, 77-79. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/leader-2020-000244>

**Nadine Newman** ([nnewman2007@gmail.com](mailto:nnewman2007@gmail.com)) is Head Librarian in the Norman Girvan Documentation Centre at The University of the West Indies

**Published:** May 2021