Leading Holistically: A Practical Approach to Library Leadership to Nurture Growth, Understand Motivation, and Maximize Potential

Gricel Dominguez

Abstract

Most library leaders are made in the field, whether assuming vacant positions, falling into the role by chance, or taking it on from a sense of duty to maintain the stability of their unit or department. Those who are lucky find a mentor, but often, little training is offered. The goal of this article is to inspire new and seasoned leaders to examine their position and evaluate how their leadership style can inspire and motivate members of their team to achieve their best work while thriving within their organization. It is also inspired by concepts presented in popular works on leadership, motivation, and productivity, chief among these Gretchen Rubin's *The Four Tendencies*, Liz Wiseman and Greg McKeown's *Multipliers*, and Cal Newport's *Deep Work*.

Introduction

A good leader can make a team and a bad leader can break one. With stress at an all-time high, a good leader can help their team navigate uncertainty, lack of motivation, and the ever-present threat of burnout. The call to lead holistically invites us to consider the broader implications of our leadership style on the resilience of our team, both professionally and personally. It is an invitation to step back and slow down, to lead from a place of compassion and meet others where they are, maximizing productivity, nurturing talent, and granting people the space to achieve their potential.

Most library leaders are made in the field, whether assuming vacant positions, falling into the role by chance, or taking it on from a sense of duty to maintain the stability of their unit or department. Those who are lucky find a mentor, but often, little training is offered. By tailoring your methods to the motivation styles and needs of your unit, you can better align your practice

to produce better results, gain buy-in, and establish a sense of community based on mutual respect, compassion, and connection.

The goal of this article is to inspire new and seasoned leaders to examine their position and evaluate how their leadership style can inspire and motivate members of their team to achieve their best work while thriving within their organization. My concept of "leading holistically" is based on my experience in middle management as assistant library director and public services librarian at a small, private university, and chair to the reference department at a large, state university's sister campus, collectively spanning a decade to date. It is also inspired by concepts presented in popular works on leadership, motivation, and productivity, chief among these Gretchen Rubin's *The Four Tendencies*, Liz Wiseman and Greg McKeown's *Multipliers*, and Cal Newport's *Deep Work*.

Understanding Motivation

Some years ago, I encountered a post on Gretchen Rubin's Four Tendencies Framework, which sent me down the proverbial rabbit hole seeking information on Rubin's model of motivation as described in *The Four Tendencies*. Reading the book, I wanted to know how I could apply Rubin's framework in my own life, which then led me to consider how motivation plays a role among the members of my department. I wanted to learn what motivated my team to engage in projects, achieve new goals, and respond to assigned tasks—why some need more direction while others prefer a hands-off approach. The Framework, which details four main tendencies, or motivation types, serves as a model to assess internal and external factors that influence motivation. Upholder, Questioner, Rebel, and Obliger: these four frames serve as the basis for the Four Tendencies Framework, with some traits overlapping across more than one tendency. In a nutshell, the Framework defines Upholders as those who meet inner and outer expectations; Obligers meet outer expectations, but resist internal ones; Questioners resist outer, but meet inner, expectations; and Rebels resist both inner and external expectations (Rubin 2017, 6).

Intrigued by the concept, I reflected on my personal tendency (Upholder) and the effect of this in my leadership style. As someone who meets both internal and external motivations with little trouble, I considered how my personal tendency toward self-motivated self-reliance might not serve members of my department. How might my personal tendency to work independently and require little supervision leave another member of my unit feeling like they are not receiving the support they need from me as their supervisor? Taking a closer look at the traits that I value in a supervisor, I examined my own methods and considered where I might need to adjust to

better serve my direct reports, whether through more direct contact and regular check-ins, detailed tasks and tighter deadlines, or greater lead-time and flexibility in getting to the end goal.

I also considered new ways to get buy-in for projects and tasks before presenting them to my team, anticipating how their motivation style might influence their perception of the task. For instance, the team member who always questions new ideas may respond more positively when that idea reflects their values or is presented with regard to the impact it will have on their role. Alternatively, the people who always say yes to new projects may need you as their supervisor to consider the scope of their current workload before adding new tasks to their plate, despite their tendency to oblige. Getting to know how your team works in terms of motivation can help you identify ways to balance the workload within a department more equitably and engage with staff who have a more challenging time seeing how they fit into the larger scheme of a project, goal, or task. Those who are externally motivated (such as your Obligers) will be more likely to respond to factors such as teamwork; Upholders may be more likely to respond to deadlines and challenges; Questioners will respond best to internal motivators, such as the value of a project to influence future advancement or its relation to a personal interest or skill that they possess and like to share; while Rebels may be the ones who are encouraged to bring ideas to the table or require more investment on your part to best determine the most effective role for their skills.

Gaining this insight requires a solid relationship with the members of your department, open communication, and a commitment to getting to know your team as well as their skills, talents, and professional interests. Observation and openness are key, but the rewards include a team that cares for the work they do and greater awareness of how motivation influences your own work as a leader.

Multiplying Talent

In their examination of good leaders, Wiseman and McKeown observe that most people are "overworked and underutilized" (2010, x). Good leaders, they conclude, make everyone smarter. A good boss makes their employees better than they are on their own, getting involved in ways that "multiply" their talent and bring out the best in them, even when they have trouble bringing out the best in themselves. Multipliers see the innate talent among their staff members and cultivate that talent, helping them thrive. Ineffective leaders "diminish" those around them. Unlike Multipliers, Diminishers bring down the energy in a group, depleting creativity and limiting talent. We all know someone who brings down the energy in a meeting or team. Diminishers are micromanagers; they shoot down ideas and stifle growth by focusing on their own interests and

intelligence rather than creating opportunities for those working under them to shine and, thus, make them shine as leaders.

Wiseman and McKeown point to five types of Multipliers: Talent Magnets, Liberators, Challengers, Debate Makers, and Investors (21). Multipliers may represent one or more of these styles in their role as leaders, but at their heart, they rely on the core value good leaders build up in those around them. Talent Magnets excel at bringing talent together, identifying those with the desired skill set, and removing obstacles that might hinder their team's ability to thrive. Liberators create an inspiring workplace, helping people perform their best while learning from mistakes and encouraging experimentation. Challengers push people to their limit while taking a step back, allowing their people to define the goal and identify their own challenge. These are the leaders who inspire their team to strive further and aim higher, encouraging them to take pride in reaching their desired end. Similarly, Debate Makers create a foundation for open and inclusive decision-making, encouraging their team to rely on reason to reach their own conclusions. Tyrants shoot down ideas and bring people down, barking orders and demanding belief in a vision that comes from the top down. Investors empower their people with the resources they need to succeed and take ownership of their work, while Diminishers micromanage and drown talent, holding people back and making them dependent on a manager to tell them what to do, rather than allowing them to take initiative and see a task through.

However, Wiseman and McKeown warn of a fine line between offering support and smothering employees. While most Diminishers fall into the category of micromanagers, there is a balance between nurturing talent and relying on toxic positivity to encourage others. The challenge lies in asking for feedback and stepping in when managerial support is needed rather than intervening every time a challenge arises. This empowers your team to take initiative and engage in critical thinking rather than rely on a manager to step in when things get tough. Self-awareness and a willingness to accept feedback are crucial to becoming a multiplier, but so is a willingness to let go and have your team take charge (204).

Listening and "Deep Work"

A good leader listens. We all know someone who needs to fill the lull in a conversation, but there is value in the silence. Organizations are made up of different personalities. Some need longer to process, not because of a lack of understanding, but because they prefer to sit with a subject before offering a response. Personally, I like to consider an issue from all sides, examining immediate and long-term implications behind a decision, considering who it affects,

how it serves our department, the library, our community, etc. Too often, discussions are led by individuals who want answers now, who fill the silence when the conversation reaches a lull, often for fear that silence means that no one is listening, interested, or willing to reply. If this is you, pause to reflect. Lay the question out there and invite folks to think on it. Rephrase the question and invite deeper introspection by letting the conversation marinate. Open the floor but resist the pressure to move the conversation until others have expressed their thoughts. By moderating the conversation, you can engage the "quiet ones" while encouraging the flow of discussion, stepping in to move the topic along or invite new voices when a member dominates the conversation or veers into a tangent.

Learning to listen is one of the most valuable skills leaders can cultivate. Whether in group meetings or candid one-on-one's, I recommend taking the time to decenter yourself from the conversation, set aside your judgment, and encourage openness and feedback. Look for patterns. Are the same issues brought up on a regular basis? Can these be addressed at the department level? Or are they a matter of administrative or institutional support? Can creative solutions be proposed? As managers, we sometimes think we can solve all the problems or have the best answers. A supportive team culture that encourages meaningful, authentic conversations can serve as an incubator for new and creative solutions to existing problems or generate ideas to create a sense of ownership in the work we do.

In a piece on leadership education, Gott (2022) outlines a listening practice to safeguard against biases in organizational cultures based on the sharing of a "common" or dominant view that "can result in the neglect or the oppression of other ways of knowing, experiencing, and practicing leadership" (52–57). Using a leadership-as-practice framework, Gott explains how adopting a listening practice can lead to critical discourse and inclusive dialogue (54–56).

Take a lesson from education and remember that different modalities work best for different folks, provide room for those who think best outside of meetings by building in opportunities for further discussion through team chat servers, listservs, etc. Providing room for introspection, you will gain greater insight from those on the frontline while positioning yourself as a leader who values open dialog and knowledge sharing.

Another practice worth embracing is the conscious choice to engage in sustained, productive focus by cultivating a culture that encourages deep work and creative output. The concept of "deep work" was popularized in Cal Newport's bestselling work of the same title. Deep work, by definition, requires total focus on a single task, serving as an antidote to the distracted multitasking that many fall victim to. However, the hamster wheel means that more

effort is spent on "shallow" tasks (e.g., busy work with little reward) than meaningful, results-producing tasks that lead to a sense of accomplishment (Newport 2016).

A search of the literature reveals a few studies examining the connection between productivity and deep work in knowledge professions. However, there is a gap in the literature as it pertains to the use of deep work practices in libraries. One study by Hollister (2016) comes close, examining research productivity among pre- and post-tenure (or permanent appointment) librarians to find connections between motivation, external pressure, personal interest, and other factors influencing research output among academic librarians following the tenure or permanent appointment. Hollister's findings reveal connections between institutional culture and administrative support in professional growth, advancement, and personal fulfillment when engaging in research. Lack of administrative and institutional support are among the issues cited by respondents with regards to research productivity, with some respondents citing "institutional cultures that nurtured library research" as a source for continued output (373).

Another review by Buschman (2014) examines the question of time spent on tasks when engaging in library work to identify what constitutes "reasonable and actionable work and productivity standards" in the profession. Buschman posits that establishing a system by which to measure productivity "probably rattles some of us, but not to do so is to accept that we will take more from those willing to work well and hard, and expect less from those who will not, and in the end that is both organizationally and politically corrosive" (358).

Beyond the library literature, an examination of deep work among executive search consultants notes that leadership support is essential for equitable access to focus blocks, whether in the office, while working from home, or through scheduled PTO (McLaughlin 2023).

How individuals engage in deep work depends on their preference, but I invite supervisors to consider the value of sustained effort to support professional development, guard against burnout, and produce tangible products and actionable results. As a library faculty supervisor, I make it a point to sit down with my faculty and plan goals that include a realistic plan to engage in research and scholarship. For some, this means a nonnegotiable weekly time slot during which they engage in writing; for others, it means a planned leave or work-from-home days. Every institution is different, but as Wiseman and McKeown note, creating a Multiplier culture can mean working within the limitations of your unit (2010, 201). In keeping with that, supervisors can build a culture of deep work within their unit that functions within the structure of the larger institution. Encourage staff to carve out scheduled breaks or time for research and idea development, ideally on a daily schedule, but at least once or twice a week. At my institution, for example, research is essential to library faculty's annual assignment goals, but

often faculty complain about lack of time to truly immerse themselves in the planning and writing aspects of this goal. In my department, I have made it my goal to encourage faculty to carve out dedicated blocks of time throughout the week or month to engage in the kind of reflective, interruption-free work required for research, writing, and development. Whether the aim is to publish, design new instruction modules, plan activities, or propose a grant, this allowance of time creates the space to develop new ideas that will bring renewed energy to our unit and allow us to build stronger connections between the work we do and the organization we serve.

However, I am aware that time to engage in research is a privilege not allotted to all librarians, and I recognize that the ability to carve out such time is often sacrificed to meet the more pressing needs of daily tasks. Still, I encourage library leaders to consider the value of deep work in the long-term development of library faculty and staff. Members who are enthusiastic about their work engage in work that they love and have the time to explore that passion to its full potential. In an ideal setting, deep work requires 90-minutes of uninterrupted time daily (with four hours being the upper limit). Even a two-hour weekly session may be the start of a deep work practice that leads to the creation of a new outreach activity or manuscript for publication. Consider ways to for you and your staff to carve out that time and see what ideas can arise.

What I propose is that we, as leaders, nurture a culture that values the work of all, considers motivation styles, and provides space wherein the members of our teams can think and develop ideas rather than going along with the status quo, piling more work on the ones who work hard, as Buschman notes, and expecting less of the ones who don't. Considers why some may not be engaged. Is it a lack of motivation, interest, support, or burnout? Is the task "busy" work? Are the expectations inequitable? These are questions to consider when establishing a culture of deep work.

Practice, Reflections, and Conclusion

One of the ways that I engage in a culture of deep work in my department is by promoting and demonstrating ways to carve out focus blocks for knowledge work. These include encouraging my team members to block slots on their calendars when they are working toward goals or projects and to revisit their schedules periodically to determine where needs can shift. I also made a point of purchasing small whiteboards for each of my staff members so they can alert their fellow colleagues when they are unavailable. There are moments when we will inevitably be interrupted for a reference question or necessary task, but these small practices establish a standard of expectations and allow everyone to set time boundaries. In the last year alone,

members of my department have applied these strategies to produce the final manuscript of a book, collaborate on a book chapter, and create a library micro-credential course for the university—small practices resulting in a big impact.

Similarly, when I started applying Rubin's concept of motivation, I quickly discovered that I had long been mistaken about the motivation that led a senior member of my department to regularly offer to participate on committees. A positive, always willing member of faculty, this individual had a decades' long track record of being a collaborator and offering to take part in task forces and service roles within the organization. I perceived this person to be an Upholder like me, internally motivated and willing to take part because a task aligned with their values. I soon learned they were an Obliger, going along with tasks from a sense of external pressure and duty, even when they were already stretched thin. Learning this, I made a point to serve as a buffer, not only for this individual, but for all members of my team, ensuring that they know that "no" is an option and that I will support their decision when they choose to sit out a project or turn down the opportunity to add another commitment to an already full slate. These practices have allowed me to become a better leader through inquiry and observation, bringing me closer to my staff and granting me greater understanding of their needs.

That said, it is easy to forget to look after *ourselves* when we are managing a team. Too often, the role comes with additional, often unseen labor in the form of human resource management, problem solving, and other necessary, but hard to define, tasks that support the professional and personal development of our staff while meeting the goals of the organization. In serving others, don't forget to look after yourself. Show empathy for your own situation and recognize that being a leader can take an emotional and mental toll, particularly in times of high stress and demand. Delegate, scale back, say no, and take your own lesson to heart to prevent overwhelm before it results in burnout (ask me how I know). Leading holistically asks us to lead from within and develop talent through trust, empathy, and awareness of the needs of others. A strong team is a capable one, and a good leader knows when to ask for help.

I invite you to start with a self-reflective practice, discover your own motivation style, engage in practices that allow you to lead by example and create a culture that supports a holistic sense of organizational wellness through introspection, compassion, and a real desire to listen and learn from each other.

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Gricel Dominguez (i.am.gricel@gmail.com) is User Engagement Librarian and Chair of Information and Research Services at Florida International University's Hubert Library.