



Making a Positive Impact as a Library Leader:

A Qualitative Study of Past and Future Library Leaders

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Introduction

This study analyzed responses from 318 academic librarians in order to understand what leadership traits had a positive effect on their work lives and what traits they think future library leaders need. Their responses were grouped into seven leadership themes for past positive leaders: emotional intelligence, empowering, visionary thinker, communicator, librarian/manager, trustworthy, and a catalyst for change; and six themes for future library leaders: people first, visionary, change agent, experienced librarian, role model, and communicator. The leadership themes of past positive and future library leaders overlap on five themes: inter and intrapersonal skills, visioning, communicating, change agent, and competent and experienced librarian. This paper will discuss the importance of these overlapping traits.

Literature Review

Followers are an important part of the leadership process; yet, leadership studies rarely examine followers and their influence on leadership.¹ To truly understand leadership, it must be defined in relation to followership.² The two have, to say the least, a complex relationship.³ Leadership occurs in interactions between leaders, followers, and the culture of the organization.⁴ Leaders only possess a trait if followers perceive they do and if the organizational culture finds the trait valuable.⁵ This makes good leadership a product of good followership.⁶ Leadership here is defined as, "the process whereby one or more individuals succeeds in attempting to frame and define the reality of others," and a leader must be in, "a situation in which an obligation, expectation, or right to frame experience is presumed or offered and accepted by others."⁷ In other words, a leader creates meaning around organizational work and events and has that meaning freely accepted by those in the organization. This meaning shapes followers' perceptions of their organizational life. Leaders influence followers through the meaning they create. Followership is defined as voluntarily accepting and following a specific leader's meaning. Followers are free to withdraw their acceptance at any time, thereby rendering a leader's power to influence null. Leadership is better understood as a leadership/followership process. Within this process, followers may actually hold the real power and influence.

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Studying leadership from the point of view of followers is an important line of research.⁸ Followers have to accept a leader's organizational meaning, but first they must accept a leader as legitimate. For a leader to be accepted as a leader, he/she must meet cultural expectations about abilities, behaviors, and values. These expectations come from a myriad of sources, but especially the organizational and professional culture. If a leader does not display the cultural aptitudes of leadership, then he/she will never be accepted as a leader. Understanding how followers want and expect a leader to act, and what they want and value in a leader is crucial. A follower bases his/her decision to follow a leader on values and identity.⁹ Organizational culture is created and sustained by the values of its members. Leaders must be the prototype of accepted organizational values.¹⁰ When the values of leader, followers, and culture compete, the leader, more often than not, loses.

Methodology

This study sought to understand what traits academic librarians value in library leaders. Respondents were asked to remember a leader who had a positive impact on their daily work life and then use three words that best described him/her. Next, respondents used three words to describe future library leaders who will have a positive impact. The full questionnaire is available in Appendix One. This study received IRB approval in the winter of 2016. A total of 318 respondents completed the survey. All data was analyzed by hand using a process called constant comparative analysis (CCA), which is the most used method for analyzing results in qualitative research.¹¹ Respondents' answers were first analyzed using open coding. After all responses were coded, codes were compared to ensure consistency in coding. Next, using axial or selective coding, similar categories of codes were grouped together into larger themes.¹² These themes were defined based on the traits that make up that theme. This process was continued until no new themes emerged from the data. This study is limited by the non-generalizability of the findings, and the possibility data collection and analysis was subject to the researcher's bias, which the use of constant comparative analysis helps keep in check.

Results & Discussion

Of the 318 respondents, 260 were women (82%), 62 were men (19.5%), and 6 either did not specify a gender or self-identified as transgender or non-binary (2%).[†] The respondents' average age was 47 ½ years old. Only 20 respondents could not think of a library leader who had a positive impact on their daily work life. For past positive leaders, seven leadership themes emerged: emotional intelligence, empowering, visionary thinker, communicator, librarian/manager, trustworthy, and a catalyst for change. For the leadership traits future library leaders would need to have a positive impact, six leadership themes emerged: people first, visionary, change agent, experienced librarian, role model, and communicator. The leadership themes of past positive and future library leaders overlap on five themes: inter and intrapersonal skills, visioning, communicating, change agent, and competent and experienced librarian. This paper will discuss the importance of these overlapping traits for libraries and librarianship.

Inter and Intrapersonal Skills

Library leaders with strong inter and intrapersonal skills possess two important qualities: emotional intelligence and a people first mindset. The theme of inter and intrapersonal skills was far and away the most popular theme. Respondents cited the traits associated with inter and intrapersonal skills more often and in greater number than any other themes in the study. The four other overlapping themes of this study are all bolstered by strong inter and intrapersonal skills. The emotionally intelligent library leader is one who is self-aware, man-

[†] Percentages are rounded and therefore equal to more than 100% when added together.

ages his/her emotions, uses empathy, and has solid relationships with those in the library. Much of leadership comes down to relationships, and emotional intelligence helps a leader build and maintain those relationships. A people first mindset is one where a library leader is able to relate to, support, and empathize with others in the organization.

Empathy is part of both definitions since it was the trait respondents listed the most for this theme. Empathy is what library leaders use to create relationships with and understand the needs of those in their library. No matter the definition, the fundamental point of leadership is influencing others. In any organization, leaders are influencing and being influenced by everyone in the organization. To influence, a leader needs more than hierarchical authority; strong working relationships are needed as well. Library leaders with inter and intrapersonal skills are able to make the needed connections to build those relationships. Empathy also plays an important role in managing organizational change. A strong current running through respondents' answers was that of change. The respondents had experienced much change in the nature of their jobs, libraries, and the profession as a whole and sensed much more was coming. Change takes an emotional toll on the people involved. The empathetic leader understands when to move forward with change and when to hold back because they are able to relate to and understand others so well. Knowing when to undertake change and when not to may be the key element in determining whether change is successful or not.

Vision

Almost one-third of all respondents cited "vision" as an important trait of future library leaders, and a large number of respondents also cited it as an important trait of past positive library leaders as well. This speaks to the changing nature of librarianship and the changing purpose of academic libraries. A visionary library leader not only has a vision for the future of the library, but they are able to share that vision and are politically savvy. A visionary library leader anticipates tomorrow's library needs while questioning today's practices. They are also able to collaborate and act as a library advocate. A vision is a key component of the meaning a library leader creates. This meaning influences the work, direction, and outlook of the library as a whole. A library leader with a strong vision frames all organizational events within the vision of the library. A vision is also a message of hope. A strong vision means the library will progress and continue to evolve to meet user needs. That the study's participants recognized the value of a vision and leader who has one is a recognition that academic libraries must change and cannot stay the same.

Communicating

A library leader who is a strong communicator can communicate in the ways others in the library need, knows how to actively listen and make others feel heard, and communicates regularly. In order to be effective, communication must be consistent, clear, and courteous, and it should flow in all directions. Communication should not just be about the library leader communicating with everyone in the library, but also about everyone in the library communicating with the leader. One of the best ways to share a vision is through simple and consistent messaging. A leader who is a strong communicator, must also clearly and concisely explain decisions and how those decisions were made. A transparent leader is one who is effective at open and honest communication. A library leader who is a strong communicator is a strong listener, which was a popular trait for this theme. To effectively listen, a person must first want to understand another. Communication is often stymied because we simply want our point of view to be heard. Good listening means using empathy and picking up on non-verbal forms of communication. This skill is critical in allowing for the many and diverse voices in the library to be heard.

Change Agent

How information is created, stored, disseminated, and used changes on a seemingly daily basis. Librarianship needs leaders who are comfortable with change, and can successfully lead change in their libraries. The change agent library leader is innovative, flexible, open-minded, and not afraid to take risks. Risk taking is not normally associated with librarianship, but survey participants used the phrase a good deal. Risks can and should be managed to minimize adverse effects, but each new library service or project is a risk with at least some negative consequences involved. Even the best laid plans and most well-thought out decisions do not always work, so a change agent library leader must be flexible enough to change the organizational change as needed. Having a strong and shared vision is tightly coupled with being a change agent library leader.

Competent & Experienced Librarian

Organizational leaders who are extremely successful—no matter the type of organization or work performed—know all areas of their organization's work because they have performed that work themselves. Their experience and expertise helps them solve organizational problems, make better decisions, and identify with other organizational members. A competent and experienced librarian is one who is knowledgeable in all aspects of academic libraries, is technologically proficient, and has had a long and varied career. Knowing the work of the library reduces the distance between library leader, librarians, and library staff. Librarianship is an applied profession, and leaders must be competent in the work of the library in order to be trusted, accepted, and followed. In order to be “one of us,” a member of the professional and organizational culture, a library leader must be able to perform the work expected of others and have a deep understanding of librarianship. Technical competence comes from experience, which provides expertise and a first-hand knowledge of the history of the profession.

Conclusion

The respondents prefer a library leader who possesses strong inter and intrapersonal skills, can communicate well, is able to lead change, has the ability to create a shared vision of the future, and is an experienced and strong librarian. These traits are in many respects the fundamental skills of leadership. A more in-depth exploration of these skills is needed, however, and they should be the starting point for further research on library leadership traits. How are these skills best manifested in a library? How do librarians perceive these traits in a library leader? More importantly, are these valued leadership traits shared throughout the profession as a whole? By better understanding what librarians want and need in library leadership, library leaders and librarians can build better relationships and better working environments to carry out the important work that needs to be done.

Appendix One

Think of a library leader with whom you have worked that had a positive influence on your daily work life. This person could be a formal leader (dean/director, associate dean/director, department head, etc.) or an informal leader (a person with no formal hierarchical position but to whom people look for leadership). Once you have a person in mind, please move to question one. If you cannot think of anyone, then please move to question two.

Question One

Thinking of the library leader who has had a positive influence on your daily work life, please list the three traits that best describe this person.

- 1.) _____
- 2.) _____
- 3.) _____

Question Two

If you really cannot think of any library leader that has positively influenced your daily work life, then please check the box below and move to question three.

- No library leader has positively influenced my daily life.

Question Three

Thinking about the future of librarianship, what three traits should library leaders have to positively influence the profession and the work life of librarians?

- 1.) _____
- 2.) _____
- 3.) _____

Age

_____ Years Old

Gender

[Open Ended]

Anything else you would like say?

[Open Ended]

Endnotes

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