



Editor's Keyboard

Gregg Sapp

On Leadership, Not for Dummies

One of the most curious and, to me, incomprehensible publishing phenomena of recent years has been the glut of books that are frankly and unapolo-

getically written “for dummies.” This popular and evidently profitable series includes titles on subjects as diverse as *Virtual Reality for Dummies*, *Dating for Dummies*, *Dream Interpretation for Dummies*, *Grilling Burgers for Dummies*, *Stress Management for Dummies*, *The Historical Jesus for Dummies*, *Your Dream Career for Dummies*, and so on. Apparently, there are a lot of unabashed “dummies” out there who buy these books. You can even get your dummies fix via podcast. Personally, while I am not loath to admit to my ignorance on a variety of topics, I would be more inclined to seek basic information on them from a book with a title like *A Brief Introduction to Quantum Physics* than the oxymoronic *Quantum Physics for Dummies*. None other than Niels Bohr said, “If anybody says that he can think of quantum theory *without* getting giddy, it merely shows that he hasn’t understood the first thing about it.”¹ How can *any* part of it be for dummies? For that matter, who wants to date a dummy?

During the last holiday season, I sought refuge from the mall pandemonium by slipping into a bookstore, where I always know that I can find peace and quiet in the self-help section. (Why that is I do not know, but people who are inclined to shop for self-help books seem like an extraordinarily peaceful and quiet lot, at least while in the bookstore.) En route, though, I passed an entire range of bookshelves dedicated to a vast selection of Dummies titles. Among the titles that I previously mentioned, I happened upon a book that caught my attention for its incongruousness; it was titled *Leadership for Dummies*. Because it was near Christmas, I paused to think about people with whom and for whom I’ve worked—who I thought I might give that book as a slightly backhanded gift. Not to name any names, but probably like most of you, I’ve known a

few people who thought of themselves as leaders, but who were thought of by their followers as not much more than dummies.

Which led me to contemplate a more profound question that this book raised in my mind.

The premise behind this book is that even dummies can learn the essential skills of leadership. In this regard, the authors subscribe to the point of view that leadership is a learned quality that requires no particular intelligence, charisma, or emotional maturity. Any erstwhile loser with the proper training can be a leader. Thus, chapters are devoted to explanations of the processes of leading, the mechanics of team building, and even the tactical logistics of articulating a vision. This book represents a “how-to” primer on becoming a leader, and its fundamental assumption is that there is no intrinsic difference between the leadership capabilities of the CEO and the guy who shines her shoes. All that you need to do is follow the instructions and, voila, you’re a leader. Even if you are a dummy.

In stark contrast to that school of thought is one that posits genuine leaders manifest some intangible qualities of mind and character that make people naturally follow them. These leaders are born, not made. They fill up a room when they enter it by the sheer force of their presence. In a crisis, all eyes turn toward them, and they seem to emanate the kind of confidence that both reassures and inspires. Elite of intellect, yet populist in philosophy, they wear the burdens of their leadership lightly. The basic premise behind this view of leadership is that no matter how great your accomplishments, you cannot be a true leader unless you possess this innate *je ne sais quoi*. Not every dummy can become a leader.

This issue of *LA&M* offers some perspectives on library leadership that support both points of view in some ways, and also neither of them in others. In the latest installment of our ChangeMasters series, Susan Corl looks at the career of Dr. Richard Rubin, a library educator and administrator whose research on management is rigorous and influential, yet whose personal style of leadership is so casual that he insists that his students call him Rick. Irmin Allner uses the Competing Values Framework to illustrate how leaders must balance multiple needs, which sometimes requires them to think and act outside of their comfort zones. Innovation is usually considered to be one of the

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continued on next page

Shackleton's men. Another Huntford book, *The Last Place on Earth* (originally published as *Scott and Amundsen*), recounts in great detail the preparations made by the teams who hoped to be the first to reach the South Pole, and by the time the reader reaches the narrative of the actual assaults on the pole, the eventual outcome appears as inevitable as a Greek tragedy.³ As Shackleton was a master leader in emergency conditions, Amundsen was the consummate planner, ensuring as much as humanly possible that emergency conditions would not overwhelm him and his men, even in the Antarctic. On the other hand, while Robert Scott had more courage and strength in his little finger than I have in my whole body, it is beyond distressing to read about the planning and execution failures attributable to his leadership that led to the deaths of Scott and his four comrades during their desperate and disorganized return from the South Pole.

Careful preparation and planning, the importance of maintaining strong interpersonal relationships within

a team during emergencies—these and a hundred other leadership lessons are found in these stirring adventures. I am keen to know whether LAMA members can recommend similar books in which leadership is modeled as part of an entertaining story, whether true or fiction. If you have such a recommendation, go to <http://blogs.ala.org/LAandM.php> and share it with the rest of us!

References

1. Huntford, Roland, *Shackleton* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1986).
2. Cherry-Garrard, Apsley, "The Boss," *The Nation* (December 13, 1919), 397-98.
3. Huntford, Roland, *The Last Place on Earth* (New York: Atheneum, 1985).

outcomes or products of effective leadership, but what that really means, in a library context, is often misunderstood. John Bednarz's philosophical discourse on the subject humanizes the amorphous concept of innovation by showing how it arises from complex interpersonal interactions. Pixey Mosely and Wendi Kaspar take a nurturing view of leadership, focusing on the process by which managers recruit, hire, and retain library employees, and how they must adapt in order to attract new blood. Michael Aloï and Joyce Gotsch look at how a team-based management program has worked at Dowling College, where every member of the team is an equal, and leadership comes from the group conscience.

Leadership is indeed a nebulous attribute. My own opinion is that there are as many styles of leadership as there are leaders, and that some are instinctive, while others are strategic. Mastering some particular skill set or knowledge base does not certify you as a leader. Likewise, even if you are the center of attention and larger than life in your personal comportment, you may still fail miserably as a leader. The key, to me, is to find the leadership style that works for you, then to develop it.

That, by the way, is a big part of what LAMA is all about. Recently, there has been discussion at executive board meetings about the appropriateness of incorporating the word "leadership" into LAMA's official name. Certainly, the title Library Administration and Management Association has served the division well for many years.

Still, leadership is a quality that transcends just administration and management, and I for one would like to see LAMA become LLAMA, the Library Leadership And Management Association. I even like the acronym better, since it complements the (un)official LAMA doodle, which originally appeared in the summer 2007 issue of *LA&M*.²

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This doodle, by the way, illustrates a *llama*. The stuffed animal that we give away at conference is also a llama. For the record, a *lama* is a Tibetan monk. Call me picky, but that has always bothered me.

References

1. Niels Bohr in W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter, *Oxford Dictionary of Scientific Quotations* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 2005): 72.
2. With apologies to Bob Daugherty for the unauthorized use of the doodle, which has appeared in his signature line.