

## New Perspectives on Leadership

### Inspirational Innovation

Bonnie L. Fong

*New Perspectives on Leadership is a new regular column featuring new librarians or emerging managers as guest columnists to present a fresh and compelling view of leadership in the profession.*

It is not easy to be seen as a leader when you are new to a field and being (relatively) young doesn't help either. However, it is possible to lead early in one's career. With innovative thinking, passion, determination, and diligent work, creative leadership can inspire others to follow. Of course, it is easier to attract followers if you show that you are not only knowledgeable, but also have a good understanding of the situation you're hoping to change or improve. Another key is the ability to explain to stakeholders how the change will benefit them and the library's patrons.

#### **The situation**

My first professional librarian position was at a small college with a laid-back environment. Since most students were commuters, both the main campus and the branch campus were usually very quiet. We also had a number of off-site programs and a growing number of online offerings, so those students were unlikely to come on campus. Still, I was surprised by how few visitors the libraries received and by the lack of library services offered to students off-site and online.

After discussions with the library staff and other campus staff to ensure that my understanding of the situation was not off-base, I began to offer my ideas for helping the library better serve its users. Although I was hired as the Technical Services and Information Literacy Librarian, I saw a real need for greater promotion of the library and for the library to meet the changing needs of its users. It was a gap I was willing to volunteer my time and energy to fill.

#### **Technology**

I suggested venturing into virtual reference services such as chat and text reference. I also recommended that we get a generic library email account for e-mail reference queries. Although there was some initial resistance due to unease with technology among the staff, I allayed that by volunteering to set everything up and promising to offer training sessions. I created a Meebo account for the library and signed us up for a nationwide texting pilot program (My InfoQuest), then provided one-on-one training with each person who would be involved. I also took the lead in promoting these new services. The faculty – especially those teaching off-

site or online – were very impressed and appreciative of these new services and, in turn, helped the library promote them to their students.

Noticing the increasing trend of colleges and libraries putting up Facebook pages, I created the first official one on campus. There was some initial resistance from administrators to this new idea, but once I was able to convince them of the many benefits of having an official presence on Facebook, such as having a(nother) venue for promoting the library and for allowing current and prospective students to communicate with us, they approved my idea. After promoting the library's Facebook page around campus, colleagues in other departments got in touch with me for help with starting their own Facebook pages.

## **Programming**

Seeing how diverse the student body was, but noticing a lack in diversity programming on campus, I began putting together exhibits and having lunchtime celebrations in the library for the diversity history months. I reached out to others who might be interested in participating in or even co-sponsoring these activities, such as student organizations, academic and non-academic departments, and individuals. After hearing about the Black History Month Celebration I organized and attending the Women's History Month Celebration, an English professor approached me to see if I could put together an event for National Poetry Month. She brought two of her classes to the library for that celebration. Word spread and faculty and students made other requests. They wanted a South Asian celebration, a National Nurses Week event, and some similar activities on our branch campus.

On the more academic side of programming, I started offering library tours and holding library workshops. I felt these would be helpful for transfer and graduate students who did not receive a library orientation like traditional freshman students receive. I met with the admissions office to tell them about these new offerings, and they have taken the idea a step further, working to incorporate the library into their new orientation program for nontraditional students. In the meantime, a dean heard about the library workshops and met with me to discuss what kind of complementary workshops could be offered by the Center for Learning. Both sets of workshops are now combined into a new series of academic workshops, which the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program is making part of the requirements of their program.

## **Reputation**

I began to build a reputation around campus as being an innovative thinker, familiar with current technologies, interested in collaboration, energetic, hard-working, and willing to go the extra mile to implement my ideas or to help others with theirs. Colleagues sought me out for help with various Web 2.0 tools and I was asked to join technology-related committees on campus. All members of the college community – from students to staff to faculty to administrators – felt comfortable giving me feedback and building on my initial ideas. I was seen as a leader on campus!

## Reflections

I realized that I did not have to be labeled a “manager” to have influence. Neither are years of experience a prerequisite. To be a leader, one only needs followers. To gain followers, one must have a vision or idea that others will support, and even help promote. I was humbled to see the support I received from the college community, from helping me to publicize the changes I had instituted to replicating my vision in their own departments, and from requesting that I offer more similar programming to asking for opportunities to collaborate on projects together.

## A Good Leader

To convince people to follow you, it is essential to be aware of not only the current situation, but also the history involved. What are the perceptions of each of the stakeholders? Consider how your vision or idea will affect them. Be sure to highlight how it benefits them and address what you will do to try and lessen any negative effects. It is important to show that you care, to show your support for all those who may be impacted. If you demonstrate that you are working just as hard as they are, your colleagues will be more willing to join in.

Whenever change is proposed, there is often opposition, whether great or small. Leaders do not immediately retreat. They listen to any concerns and are willing to adjust their vision or idea appropriately.

A leader’s passion can be inspiring. I think the very best leaders inspire others to be leaders themselves. Not only do great leaders motivate others to act, they encourage them to contribute their own innovative ideas, creating a collaborative atmosphere where everyone feels valued. Leadership therefore considers the short- and long-term needs of the institution. In a library environment where staffing and resources can be limited, a collaborative leadership approach that fully cultivates human talent creates a new resource in the process, one that continues to grow, and one that is essential to success. This kind of constructive and positive work setting is much more beneficial for those who are employed by, work with, and are served by the library.

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