

New Perspectives in Leadership

Don't Tell Me No: A Call for Inspired Leadership

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Leadership is similar to parenthood in many ways. Growing up, I had extremely supportive parents. As the oldest of 4, my parents were most certainly bombarded with competing requests, ideas, demands, timelines, deadlines, and various priorities of each child. Despite all that, my parents offered discipline and structure with clear expectations. And, through all that, my parents always respected and listened to any and all ideas, no matter how big or small. One of my favorite memories and examples of this was when I was entering my senior year of high school, focusing on preparing to apply, be accepted, and go on to college. One day sitting at the kitchen table, I confidently announced to my parents that I wanted to go to Russia (back then the USSR) to attend college. I very distinctly recall the expression on their faces, as they sat there silently. I was a small town girl, the first generation student to head off to college, and of all places, I wanted to go out of the country. As a parent now, I feel safe in speculating what went through their heads at this bold announcement, including 'what's this girl thinking, she's crazy, what in the world?, why? What do I say? I don't want her to go that far, I'm going to cry.' Finally, after what seemed like an eternity but was probably just a few seconds, my dad spoke. He calmly asked, "really?" My mom then asked, "there? Why there?" I bravely gave all my reasons for wanting to go to school there. So you ask, did they say yes, or no? That answer will be revealed later. What I propose now is a call and challenge for inspired leadership that will further transform libraries of the 21st century.

What I have learned in my still relatively young career as a leader is that there are times when the answer is yes, and times when the answer is no, and times when the answer is maybe. Sometimes the answer seems so obvious, clear, a no-brainer, and yet, leaders struggle to make the "right" decision. As leaders, we are called upon to steer the ship to a destined location. The pathway can vary and change often, and at the last minute, however, the destination remains the same. With so many options available, the challenge for a leader becomes learning when to say yes, no, and maybe, and how to do that in the most effective way so that you still reach the destination. Also necessary in that navigation process is accepting that leadership can come from anyone at any level at any time in the form of shared ideas. There have been times when despite being a manager, supervisor, coordinator, department head, or parent, I have willingly taken leadership from staff in my departments, my peers, and even my children. Learning how and when to use what strategy is a constant challenge. One thing is certain: whatever the strategy or the answer, being supportive through that exploration process is a must.

Leadership literature often points to attributes of being a good leader such as being a good listener or being a risk-taker. Among the countless resources, though, are a number of items

teaching leaders how to say no. Even Tony Blair, former prime minister of Britain is quoted as saying, “the art of leadership is saying no, not yes. It is very easy to say yes.”¹ There seems to be a general notion that saying no is an art form and being able to say no creatively and tactfully is what’s most important. I found this a bit contradictory to my role as a leader. As leaders we are tasked in moving a unit, department, or organization forward. We do this through the people we hire. In 2011, Forbes.com published a short piece by Steve Denning called “Leadership: How to Say ‘No’ While also Inspiring People.” I was hesitant to read it at first because I did not want to be told yet again how to say no. Instead, I was pleasantly surprised that this article touched on the contradiction playing in my head. If we are to lead organizations into the new century in innovative, creative, resourceful ways, and we hire those people that bring that plus energy and enthusiasm, how are we as leaders nurturing those forward-thinkers? Is saying no truly the best approach? Denning offers the example of Steve Jobs saying no to more ideas than what he says yes to because “innovation is saying ‘no’ to 1,000 things.” The trick is saying yes to the right things. Denning also touches on the potential negative impact on employees who hear ‘no’ and what that does to their inspiration. He says

“the sound of ‘no’ can deliver a spirit-crushing blow. It can carry dead the weight of hierarchical authority, the stench of soul-destroying command-and-control. It can imply an adult-child relationship ...rather than an adult-adult relationship in which leaders and followers have a reciprocal responsibility to listen to each others’ ideas and converse, rather than to command.”²

He also points out what traditional leadership has looked like, those who say yes, those who say no, and proposes to change this to a more radical approach, even when the answer still has to be no. He proposes 3 approaches. Saying yes, saying let’s explore, and saying what-if? I find these approaches inspiring, and have actually been using the ‘what-if’ approach more concretely since 2010 in my leadership style.

What might this mean for libraries? I take leadership extremely seriously. I actively seek out any opportunity to learn more about it. And I often worry about the impact of my leadership on others and go through periods of self-reflection wondering if I am truly suited to lead. I struggle to understand how libraries strive to be innovative capsules of information sharing, of knowledge, and of life-long learning, and hire individuals who are passionate about these things too. Nearly all vacancy announcements that I see call for individuals with creativity, innovation, and knowledge of emerging technologies. Libraries go out and recruit and hire the best and the brightest, the most energetic and enthusiastic. More and more, libraries strive to hire the progressive, forward-thinkers of our profession. We hire them and bring them into cultures that perhaps are not quite ready to support their initiatives or professional growth. Organizational cultures are most difficult to change and do not change quickly at all. Libraries run the risk of losing their forward-thinkers all the time, especially in a society now that moves around a lot more than in the past. As leaders, we want a library of the newest century reflected in our spaces, collections, services, and people. We explore innovative practices in these areas willingly and perhaps begrudgingly at other times, and tend to hold on to traditional practices, because after all that is more comfortable. And, yet the one area that we do not seem to be

pushing outside the box is leadership. Vacancy announcements for leadership positions also ask for creative and innovative leaders, and still, our leadership practices seem to be more traditional than innovative or inspiring. Traditional leadership has seemingly focused on delivering the negative message. And, as Denning points out, the sound of that crushes the spirit. We are very good at stopping the flow of ideas, and with that we are doing our profession an injustice. We cannot claim to be innovative and to support innovation, if we do not start leading innovatively. I understand that libraries do not have infinite resources of money, space, or people. But rather than saying we cannot, how about we ask how can we?

This is a call to all leaders, emerging leaders, managers, and peers, to begin embracing new approaches to leadership as Denning suggests. The call is for leaders, to reconsider the pathway of libraries as we move them forward to our destination of being on the cutting edge.

I challenge our leaders to look at our changing world from different perspectives, like Pixar, Apple, Google, Amazon, DreamWorks, and even a long-standing timeless classic as Disney. These are all corporations that are withstanding the changing times, and environment of serving people in all sorts of capacities. They mirror libraries in the sense that they too occupy space, resources, and people. They also want to be at the forefront of people's imaginations. They have built corporations that, for now seem sustainable. If we look carefully at these corporations, they share one commonality, and that is that they all have inspired leadership that have set the bar extremely high. With inspired leadership that have remained fluid, organic, and relevant in our rapidly changing world. Libraries certainly recognize the need to stay relevant; we say it all the time. The time has come to review our leadership practices and learn from others whose entire cultures are focused on the future. We need to do that without fear of the unknown, our own successes, or ourselves. We need to do the very thing we are hiring individuals to do; be creative, innovative, and forward thinking.

I challenge our leaders to be daring, to be courageous, to be brave, to be visionary. Are those not qualities that are identified in leadership over and over again? We have the opportunity to redefine what the library culture should and could be. Will we know when we have accomplished that? I think so. It is one of those things that cannot describe, but when you see it, you know it is that.

I challenge our leaders not to say no. Instead, encourage free-flowing ideas and discussions that offer structure to an idea. Identify what can be done. Ask questions, and ask more questions. Create the right teams for the right projects. Exploration does not necessarily mean that the entire library is involved. We build trust in each other's skills and talents. Recognizing that the answer in the end might still be no is important. The difference will be found in the process of reaching that answer. With true exploratory discussions, the answer will more than likely be a mutual decision, avoiding situations where individuals are told no and may feel that their spirits have been crushed.

I challenge our leaders to take an honest look inward to evaluate our profession's true endeavor of becoming libraries of the 21st century, providing ubiquitous access to all our respective communities, and to question how we are getting there when the type of librarian is changing. As leaders, we challenge our librarians to think differently, to think broadly, to think creatively,

and it is time that we do the same. Yes, this means that the way we do business will further change. It will mean having more difficult and open discussions. And, I point out, that I said open discussions, not meetings. It means sharing a space that encourages free thinking and exploration without judgment, and without fear.

I challenge *you*, as a leader, to dig deep and look honestly at your own leadership practices and dare to lead differently. I mentioned earlier that I would give you the response my parents gave me about going to Russia for college. My experiences growing up played a major role in my ability to negotiate, understand, and explore ideas, in a confident manner. I grew up in an environment where it was ok and totally acceptable to have your own ideas for moving forward. I thrive in such environments and seek them out in my professional aspirations. I consider myself a forward-thinker, willing to question the norm and willing to push the envelope. I can creatively come up with some pretty outlandish ideas at times, and can even surprise even myself at some of my ideas. I also consider myself an emerging leader, faced with the challenge of harnessing and leading the energy of forward-thinkers in my department. It had not occurred to me until very recently that I actually did not know how to lead these individuals. I questioned my perceptions of leadership and wondered how leadership in libraries is changing, especially since our library worlds are changing so fast. I have challenged myself to explore my own leadership approaches and to be unafraid of failing forward.

I leave with you with two things. First, my parents' response, ultimately was, 'let's give this some time to think about it, in the meantime see what you can learn about Russia to see if in fact that is where you would still like to go to school.' I did my homework and learned for myself that I was not ready for such a big leap. I stayed in the United States. Second, I have been inspired by Pixar along the way and sometimes watch a specific video with the former Dean of Pixar University to remind me of what I want to be when I grow up...an inspired and inspirational leader.³ <http://www.edutopia.org/randy-nelson-school-to-career-video>

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Published: August 2014

References

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² Steve Denning, "Leadership: How to Say 'No' While Also Inspiring People," *Forbes* <http://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2011/05/30/leadership> (May 2011).

³ Randy Nelson, "Randy Nelson on Learning and Working in the Collaborative Age," [video]. Posted to <http://www.edutopia.org/randy-nelson-school-to-career-video> (September 8, 2008).