

Calling all Academic Librarians to Lead!: Developing and Using Inside Talent to Stay Ahead

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Introduction

In the midst of generational and rapid technological changes, libraries constantly strive to meet and anticipate the evolving needs of their communities. Many authors argue that the ability to manage and stay at the forefront of these changes demands leadership from individuals at all levels of the organization, not only from senior administrators and managers (for example, see: Ancona et al. 2007, Cawthorne 2010, Davis and Macauley 2011, Mason and Wetherbee 2004, Mosley 2014, Raelin 2003, Rowley and Roberts 2008, Russell and Stephens 2004, Schachter 2013, Smith and Sharma 2002, Stueart and Sullivan 2010, Walton 2007). Demonstrating leadership means being able “to influence and lead a group of diverse individuals to attain common goals and objectives. It differs from management, which normally involves a defined skill set and a position with supervisory responsibilities” (Feldmann, Level, and Liu 2013, 100). Library employees, a frequently underutilized resource, can help libraries be effective and evolve with the times if most of their skills and talents, including leadership skills, are developed and/or used to benefit the organization (Arant Kaspar and Van Duinkerken 2014, Davis and Macauley 2011, Drucker 2002, Maloney et al. 2010, Russell and Stephens 2004). How can senior administrators and managers maximize the use of the skills and talents present in their own libraries’ workforce to move forward? This article will employ case studies, as well as observations and research findings from the published literature, to explore how sponsored projects and service in professional associations can be used to develop and apply the leadership potential of academic librarians. Tapping into the leadership potential of its librarians can help academic libraries be proactive in the face of change, plan for succession, and retain their professionals.

Sponsored projects provide safe ‘learn by doing’ leadership training

Libraries have utilized projects to investigate and/or implement new initiatives and services (Kinkus 2007, O'Brien 2013, Train and Elkin 2001). The factors that lead to successful projects make them a practical avenue for on-the-job leadership training. In her investigation of how Ontario libraries manage projects, Horwath (2012) states that there is agreement in the project management literature about which factors contribute to the success of a project. These factors are: “management support for and involvement in the project, adequate staffing for the project, a project plan that details goals, timelines, budget and staff, a clearly defined mission for the project, project monitoring to ensure plan targets are being met, and clear communication channels” (Horwath 2012, 17). Over half of the 92 Ontario library staff members who responded to Horwath’s survey (about 55%) indicated that “management support for the project” was a “very important” factor for the success of a project. While the factors necessary for project success have been defined, the qualities that proficient project managers must possess are difficult to measure (Crawford 2000). Selecting which librarian to lead a new project requires careful consideration since the most qualified person for the position may not be the apparent choice (Kinkus 2007). Great organizational and interpersonal skills are needed to manage a project, making it is highly probable that any capable librarian will be missing some of these proficiencies and seek to acquire them (Kinkus 2007). Therefore, new project managers might be receptive to mentoring from senior administrators or managers in order to help them successfully

perform their duty. On the other end, since their support will most likely be involved, senior administrators or managers can use projects as an opportunity to cultivate the leadership skills and talents of the librarians they appoint as project managers by providing constructive feedback and allowing librarians to participate in or influence upper-level decision making.

Appointing and supporting frontline librarians as projects managers benefits the library in numerous ways. It encourages librarians to: learn by doing, push their abilities, overcome resistance to their innovative ideas, and energize their colleagues (Gordon 2004). Moreover, it helps with staff retention since librarians have indicated in a few studies that being able to perform challenging work is a reason that they would stay in the same organization (Markgren et al. 2007, Millard 2003, Moran, Marshall, and Rathbun-Grubb 2010). Lastly, it aids with succession planning as leading a project can serve as a test to help determine an individual's suitability for a future leadership or management position (Mosley 2014, O'Brien 2013). If a project manager is appointed for the latter reason, the intention should be transparent to be effective (Nixon 2008).

Working groups with co-chairs and senior-level executive owners: A sponsored project case study

Working groups, a form of team-based project work, is one way that libraries can advance and develop leadership potential among staff. This method can be illustrated using the example of the McGill University Library, an academic library in Montreal, Quebec, that serves a large research-intensive university with undergraduate and graduate programs and a population of approximately 38,500 students. The McGill Library created eight working groups in 2012 to provide recommendations for implementing the library's top strategic priorities. There was a working group for each of the following areas: collection stewardship, information literacy, reserves enhancements, single service point, sustainability, document delivery, space planning in the largest branch library, and Resource Description and Access (RDA). The Library's senior administration group, which is called the Dean's Cabinet and consisted of the Dean and four associate directors at that time, invited individual librarians to submit their names for participation in one of the working groups. All librarians in the McGill Library system (63 in total, excluding members of the Dean's Cabinet) were required to join a working group; other library staff members were asked to join on a voluntary basis. The Dean's Cabinet made the final selection of the membership for each working group to ensure that there was representation in each group from all the branch libraries and that one group did not have too many members; thus, some librarians did not receive their initial choice and were assigned to another group. From the group membership, the Dean's Cabinet then selected two members, either with leadership potential or proven leadership ability, to act as co-chairs of seven working groups. The eighth working group on RDA was chaired by the head of the library's Rare and Original Cataloguing and Authorities section. Seven out of the fourteen co-chairs selected did not have a formal management or supervisory role; these co-chairs led five of the working groups. Each working group was sponsored by one of the library's associate directors, who was the 'Executive Owner,' ultimately responsible if the working group did not accomplish its mandate so that the co-chairs would be encouraged to stretch their abilities in a safe environment. The associate director served as an advisor to the co-chairs and, as a member of both teams, acted as a liaison between the working group and the Dean's Cabinet.

In addition to management support, the co-chairs were given the opportunity to exercise their leadership skills in a structured manner by making various presentations to different audiences in the library, in order to keep all stakeholders informed and obtain feedback. The Dean attended the first meeting of each working group to indicate the questions or concerns that she wished each group to explore. This initial meeting led the groups to define their mandates and goals. A month later, the

Dean asked the co-chairs of each working group to present the group's mandate and goals at a Dean's Corner event, which is a presentation intended for all library staff, usually held every two months, that is televised live so the majority of staff can attend in person or online. Six months later, the co-chairs were invited to present, once again, at the Dean's Corner, but this time to report on their group's activities thus far. In between these two presentations, the Dean scheduled a meeting with all the co-chairs together to receive a personal update on the progress of the working groups and to give her feedback. Once a working group accomplished its mandate and submitted its final report, the co-chairs were asked to present the group's recommendations at the weekly all managers' meeting, as well as to meet personally with the Dean. The groups' Executive Owners were present at all these meetings to advocate the co-chairs' message if needed. These presentations also served to widen the co-chairs' perspectives of how the organization functions since the co-chairs were placed in a position where they had to communicate their group's message upward and downward in the organizational hierarchy, interact with many senior-level administrators, and listen to the concerns of various individuals in the library system.

Leadership lessons that the author learned: I was a co-chair of the Reserves Enhancements Working Group at McGill University Library, whose mandate was to accomplish the following three goals: i) briefly investigate course reserves in the literature to better inform current practices at the McGill Library; ii) take an audit of the reserves process in each of the branch libraries and make suggestions for improvements/streamlining, if needed; and iii) determine the best system (e.g., Aleph, WorldCat, Desire2Learn, etc.) in which to link to the McGill Library's print and electronic reserves. I had no titled leadership role, similar to my co-chair, and was relatively new to the McGill Library, having started in October 2011. When I was contacted to ask to co-chair the group in 2012, I was told that I was selected as co-chair due to my previous experience as a hospital librarian, which involved working on projects, training library paraprofessionals to answer reference questions, and peer-reviewing other staff member's reference work.

My toughest challenge as co-chair was handling internal stakeholders and politics, specifically how to obtain support from resistant individuals, both within and outside of the working group. The following factors helped me to manage this challenge and to successfully co-lead the working group in achieving its mandate within the given time frame:

1. each of the group's goals was a distinct project with clear deadlines, whose tasks were easily divided amongst the members of the groups according to their interests;
2. my co-chair and the group's Executive Owner provided assistance, advice, or moral support in overcoming any problems that arose;
3. the meetings with the Dean made me understand how our senior-level management group functioned and what was expected from the group; and
4. the feedback received from our presentations to different audiences helped me to see the larger picture by understanding the impact of our group's activities on different positions in the library, which influenced the group's final recommendations.

These success factors, i.e., defined projects, management support, and open communication with stakeholders, are also reflected in the project management literature (Horwath 2012). I learned from this experience how to effectively conduct meetings, persuade others by tailoring the delivery of the message to the audience, and diplomatically present different viewpoints in order to be able to satisfy the needs (sometimes seemingly opposite) of those both above and below me in rank.

Moving collections with coordinators and a flattened organizational hierarchy: A second sponsored project case study

Large-scale projects involving a mix of library staff and external employees are another way that libraries can exercise the leadership skills and talents of its staff. An example of a large-scale project is a move. During the summer and autumn of 2013, McGill University Library integrated its education collection into its Humanities & Social Sciences branch library and its life sciences collection into its Schulich Library of Science & Engineering branch. The education and life sciences collections were housed in their own separate spaces and needed to be moved to their final destinations. Parts of these collections were sent to storage, rather than weeding before the move. A local, general moving company was used to move the collections and two library staff members were assigned as move coordinators in each of the four locations to provide direction to the movers. The move coordinators were three head librarians, four liaison librarians, and one paraprofessional who was a circulation supervisor. There were two move coordinators per location so that two individuals could divide the work, support each other, and cover for the other when one was away. The move coordinators reported directly to McGill Library's Senior Director of Planning & Resources during the project, thus bypassing a level or two in the library's organizational hierarchy. This flattened reporting structure allowed the move coordinators to quickly obtain any additional human or material resources needed to solve problems that arose and keep the move on track.

Leadership lessons that the author learned: I was one of the move coordinators at the Schulich Library of Science & Engineering. I shared this responsibility with the circulation supervisor. Schulich Library's head librarian at that time had asked me to help him organize the move, which is how I became a move coordinator. The head librarian created the collection layout plan for merging the life sciences collection, about 55,000 items, with the existing physical sciences and engineering collection at the Schulich Library. My move co-coordinator and I were charged with executing the plan. Every book in the library had to move to incorporate the life sciences collection and approximately 62,000 physical sciences and engineering books, which had not been borrowed in 10 years, were sent to storage to make room for the life sciences books and journals. The move coordinator role consisted of: i) organizing the scheduling of library staff volunteers for tipping physical sciences and engineering books, which were to be boxed and sent to storage, and for shelving life sciences books; ii) providing direction to the movers who were working at the Schulich Library; iii) sending daily updates over a 5-week period to library staff, and for posting on the library website, about the integration of the life sciences collection into the Schulich Library; iv) supervising the work of four students on the project, which included shelving, shifting, shelf reading, sign making, and inventory; and v) working closely with librarians and library support staff in other library departments to update the catalogue, floor plans, and the website.

My toughest challenges as move coordinator were time management and keeping track of the numerous details involved in the move. The quick response from the library's Senior Director of Planning & Resources to a request, daily give-and-take briefings with the movers' supervisor, and dividing the move oversight with my co-coordinator helped me to manage this challenge and succeed in my role. Once again, the factors that led to my success, i.e., management support, open communication with stakeholders, and enough staffing, are also mentioned as success factors in the project management literature (Horwath 2012). I learned from this experience that it is possible to influence others by example, without having formal authority, by not being afraid to get your hands dirty. To prevent delays in the move when library staff or movers were short on a specific day, I unpacked boxes, shifted, and shelved, in essence pitching in whenever an extra pair of hands was needed. This did not go unnoticed by others, which helped me to enlist additional aid from library staff and movers when necessary. I also learned to think outside the box, for example, to create space where there was none by using study carrels, carts, and tables as temporary bookcases or shelving units while the different collections were being merged on the shelves.

Turning projects into leadership training opportunities

As seen from the first two case studies, projects can cultivate the leadership potential of academic librarians if management support is present and the librarians are encouraged to communicate with all stakeholders. Both of these elements will help librarians understand the larger picture, that is, understand how the organization functions and the potential effect of specific actions on the library as a whole. This is a quality that leaders possess, which is frequently mentioned in the literature (for example, see: Graybill 2014, Mosley 2014, Rowley and Roberts 2008, Stueart and Sullivan 2010). The author personally found that having a co-leader assigned to a project helps in the learning process since there is another person with whom to confront challenges, share experiences, and approach upper-level management. Co-leadership or shared project leadership among multiple librarians benefits the organization in turn by using the same project to expand the leadership skills of more than one individual.

Professional associations offer multiple leadership positions with on-the-job training

Library senior administrators and managers can increase the number of hands-on leadership training opportunities available to their employees by encouraging staff to actively participate in professional associations or by listing service to professional associations as a duty in job descriptions. Academic librarians in most institutions need to contribute to their profession in some way as a requirement for obtaining tenure (Association of College & Research Libraries 2010). One way of accomplishing this requirement is by volunteering in professional associations, which can take the form of participating in committees or task forces, helping to plan an annual conference, and serving on an executive board. Large library associations, with memberships in the thousands, such as the American Library Association (ALA) and the Special Libraries Association (SLA), have numerous chapters, divisions, and boards that need volunteers to function. Calls for volunteers are frequently posted on association listservs and websites.

Testimonials from volunteer members of professional associations often state leadership development as a benefit of participating (Davidson and Middleton 2006, Frank 1997). A study about millennials' perspectives on leadership reinforces this benefit since only 19% of study participants (9 out of 48 academic library staff members) saw barriers in obtaining leadership roles in professional associations, whereas 50% saw barriers in obtaining leadership roles in their own libraries (Graybill 2014). The reason(s) why more participants saw barriers to leadership roles in their own libraries was not indicated in the study. A possible reason might be that there are more titled leadership positions available in large professional associations than in the person's institution. Turnover may also be higher in professional associations since titled leadership positions are usually for specific periods of time, a two-year term for example, while many titled leadership positions in organizations do not have a time limit. In the latter positions, the incumbent resigns or retires. Furthermore, some associations (e.g., SLA) have formal leadership training courses or events (e.g., SLA's 3-day annual Leadership Summit) to prepare individuals for their roles.

Serving as a board member of an association's division: A professional associations case study

SLA is one large professional association that offers many volunteer positions that allow individuals to acquire, practice, or improve their leadership skills and talents. For instance, SLA's Engineering Division currently has 25 volunteers that compose its Executive and Advisory Board. The executive board officers are elected by the Division's membership for two to three year terms,

depending on the position, and consist of the Chair, Chair-Elect, Past Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, Section Chair(s), and Section Chair Elect(s). The advisory board members are selected by the Division Chair and are each responsible for specific and distinct tasks on behalf of the entire Division, about 300 members. The Standards Chair, for example, is responsible for inviting representatives from various organizations, which produce or sell standards, to speak at a standards update session at the annual conference. The Standards Chair is responsible for organizing and moderating this session at the conference, thereby taking the lead in this area for the entire Division. Some other advisory board positions are: Awards Chair, List Administrator, Fundraising Chair, Conference Program Planner, etc. The Executive and Advisory Board meets monthly via teleconferencing, and meets in person at SLA's annual conference. These monthly meetings allow each board member the opportunity to report on his/her work for the association, raise any concerns, and obtain feedback. Calls for volunteers to fill open positions on the Executive and Advisory Board are often posted on the Engineering Division listserv. Members have been known to volunteer for another position on the board, once the term for their initial assignment has expired. This allows them to acquire practical experience performing different tasks for the Division. The skills gained from performing these tasks are transferable to the workplace and beneficial for leaders, such as planning, problem solving, teamwork, and influencing skills.

Leadership lessons that the author learned: I am currently an executive board member of the SLA Engineering Division, which has given me a greater understanding of how associations function and a behind-the-scenes look at the organization and manpower involved in planning events on a grand scale, i.e., attended by hundreds or thousands of people. I learned from this experience that leadership can be shared successfully in large organizations, specifically that each individual on a team or project can be a leader for the area in which the person is responsible and contribute equally to the decision-making process. The toughest challenge I observed among board members was difficulty recruiting individuals to volunteer for certain positions or tasks, such as writing about division-sponsored sessions at the annual conference. Offering incentives (like Amazon gift cards for the latter example) and/or stressing the value of participating (like emphasizing the different publication methods for submissions received in the same situation) were used in the call for volunteers to increase recruitment.

Calling academic librarians to lead in the face of change

There are reports in the literature of non-management library staff coming forward to assume a leadership role needed to accomplish the library's objectives in the midst of organizational changes (for example, see: Nussbaumer and Merkley 2010, Paton, Beranek, and Smith 2008, Train and Elkin 2001). Senior administrators and managers in academic libraries can cultivate and use the leadership skills and talents of their librarians to confront change head-on and meet the needs of their communities. Selecting and supporting front-line librarians as project managers/coordinators and promoting service in professional associations are two possible methods of accomplishing this, which have been explored herein.

Talent management is one theme in the library leadership literature (Hernon and Schwartz 2008). This paper contributes to the literature on leadership in academic libraries by examining some ways of how to manage librarian leadership skills and talents. Further research possibilities might include using a survey or interview technique to investigate the effects of participation in sponsored projects and professional associations on expanding the leadership skills of public and special librarians, as well as comparing the effects of co-leadership or shared leadership training opportunities with other on-the-job training methods.

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