

The Accidental Director: Critical Skills in Academic Library Leadership

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Abstract

The first appointment as an academic library director can be fraught with unexpected challenges, even if you are mentally prepared for that opportunity and have moved up as planned through the organizational structure. When the appointment is unexpected and sudden, the move can be much more complicated. This article discusses how to draw on a wide variety of previous professional experiences, sharpen communication skills, and incorporate emotional intelligence during and following that transitional time to ease the path to effective leadership. The experience of being an “accidental director” will become part of a valuable tool kit regardless of your ultimate career path.

Introduction/Background

Assuming and then succeeding in a leadership role in an academic library, regardless of one’s formal position in the organizational structure, requires the right balance of two disparate types of skills. The first set consists of people (often called soft) skills to facilitate communication and effectively work with others. The second set consists of technical skills acquired through formal education complemented by practical experience and additional competencies learned on the job. In many academic libraries, the path from entering as a newly minted academic librarian, fresh from graduate school, to positions of more responsibility and authority is dependent on personal interests as well as having the requisite qualifications needed for the step up. Those consciously looking for advancement may also opt to take advantage of opportunities that arise due to internal changes within their own library or a new opportunity at a different institution.

The common thread that runs throughout career progression, however, is the ability to have at your ready disposal a set of key soft and technical skills that you have developed over time and can tap into when needed. Possessing both types of skills is particularly useful when you are faced with a new opportunity or challenge (planned or not). This tool kit is the product of your workplace observations as well as your own personal experiences (inside and outside of the workplace). You can then incorporate the lessons learned from both types of experiences into your professional profile, add that acquired knowledge to your existing skill set and academic background, and be better prepared to grow in your career. These skills, as applied to specific scenarios, will change and likely will become more refined or nuanced over time. Moreover, you will learn to rebalance them based on workplace priorities or situations. In fact, management research into organizations that include a good percentage of technical expertise (e.g., academic libraries) shows that as one’s level of responsibility increases, softer skills, often referred to as social skills, become increasingly more valuable than technical skills due to the need to work and communicate effectively with people at all levels of the organization.¹

It is important to keep in mind that some of these workplace experiences may not be positive or pleasant, yet such interactions can also be critical in the creation of the whole librarian. The library career path may also not be as direct as anticipated or planned, taking unexpected twists and turns along the way, including steps that may appear to be backward. These professional twists and how they are resolved (positively or negatively) can all be valued as long-term learning experiences. Not all librarians even have a well-defined holistic career plan. They may be placed in roles of increasing or differing responsibilities unexpectedly due to circumstances beyond their direct control.

Regardless of this, noting which approaches in those specific situations or workplace experiences were successful and which were not will provide a sound foundation for learning how to read the current environment and hone your abilities to comprehend the necessary broader and more subtle context in taking on any new responsibilities. Processing both what transpired and why will help you determine a course of action and facilitate the process of assuming well-measured risk in higher stakes workplace situations if necessary. If properly internalized and reflected on, these experiences can help individuals determine where their talents and skills best fit in the academic library universe and where they may ultimately find professional fulfillment in library work. By bearing these factors in mind, an abrupt change in professional position that includes a very significant increase in responsibilities, though initially daunting and perhaps stressful, may also be far less fraught with pitfalls than it appears at the onset.

Relevant Literature

The library literature contains relatively little in practical advice and key competencies for academic librarians who find themselves placed in positions of leadership unexpectedly. Most literature on attributes or skill sets needed for library administrative roles are discussed in the context of leadership development over longer periods of time through the assumption of additional responsibilities in a hierarchical manner that allows for slower adaptation of the skills needed to lead effectively. Competencies within the library literature which explore successful leadership traits are those associated with possessing social capital (perception of trustworthiness or a shared vision between the library administration and the library staff),² the ability to manage specific tasks and lead in a visionary sense concurrently,³ aligned ethical values – an understanding of institutional values within the library organization itself – as well as the institution at large to ensure harmony between the two entities,⁴ and self-reflection. This last trait is exemplified by the willingness to comprehend that one's own sphere of knowledge may be limited or biased and therefore potentially detrimental to the organization unless the leader seeks additional information⁵ to further inform his or her base of knowledge before decisions are made.

In general, however, the existing professional literature on effective and detrimental leadership traits in other disciplines is more abundant. Of particular note are studies in the fields of business or the social sciences⁶ (such as teaching or allied health), where direct human interactions with others is a key aspect of those professions. Positive qualities exhibited by those in leadership positions in these other areas can be extrapolated and added to the skill set needed to effectively lead in academic libraries. In fact, in times of abrupt change where the entire organizational ecosystem is disrupted, leadership qualities held in high regard in these other fields may be even more critical compared to those discussed in the library literature in order to re-establish organizational equilibrium.

The qualities most often mentioned in fields outside of the library profession include problem solving and social sensitivity,⁷ interpersonal skills such as those associated with emotional intelligence,⁸ and social intelligence.⁹ Successful leaders are recognized for their abilities to influence their organizations and bring about positive and desired outcomes through employee empowerment,¹⁰ for their ability to think critically,¹¹ particularly in times of stress, and for the ability to solve complex social problems in a dynamic organization.¹² During times of unexpected transitions and rapid change, these particular soft leadership qualities must rise to the top to adequately help an organization adjust to its new paradigm.

Although there are several programs and institutes that focus on aspects of leadership in academic libraries or academic institutions, most notably the Harvard Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians, sponsored by the Association of College & Research Libraries, and the Leading Change Institute (formerly the Frye Leadership Institute) sponsored by the Council on Library and Information Resources, most of these programs are built on assumptions that participants are mid-career individuals who have already been involved in issues such as managing people or budgets, as well as larger organizational goals such as strategic planning¹³ and thus have a firm grasp on basic concepts of leadership within academic libraries. The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) also offers two programs, one, the ARL Leadership Fellows Program for senior level librarians, which focuses on strategic thinking and larger institutional issues, and the longer (18-month) Leadership & Career Development Program, which focuses on diversity initiatives within the academic library community.¹⁴ Thus formal training programs like the above and the vast majority of the available literature concentrate on longer term training for eventually and deliberately taking on leadership roles, largely building on prior experience and allowing for gradual transitions rather than when individuals are faced with an abrupt increase in responsibilities due to unexpected circumstances.

Contextualizing the Issues and Creating a Preliminary Plan

As noted, the longer term and preferred approach to acquire and practice the softer skills required for effective leadership (specifically at the director level) in an academic library are traditionally done through these sponsored leadership development training programs and successive appointments at higher levels of responsibility in the home institution or assuming a new position at a higher rank at a differing institution. Unfortunately, in specific situations, these avenues are not always an option. This may be due to lack of opportunities to attend such training due to budget and/or time constraints or because the current organization may lack a multi-layered hierarchical structure due to the size of the library or organizational configuration. When this situation occurs, and one is placed in a position of much higher responsibility at the director level within the library structure without warning, a different approach becomes necessary as well as an immediate priority.

One of the first steps, if put in this position, is to clearly examine and evaluate the current environment. This may include processing how (and preferably why) the abrupt change occurred and what specific steps need to be put into place to ensure the library organization can function at its most fundamental levels. At this time, although you may want to present yourself as completely in control and ready to take on these new, unexpected, and significant responsibilities without assistance, a different approach that has longer lasting benefits will ultimately serve you better. At this critical juncture, carefully choosing selected allies (in or outside the library) as well as conferring with past mentors can be extremely useful. If this change is abrupt, it is equally important during this same time period to communicate and to reach out to the entire library staff as soon as possible, preferably in person, and determine

what their immediate concerns may be. For example, if the previous director left unexpectedly and without an opportunity to address the staff before doing so, the majority of the staff undoubtedly will be surprised, confused, or hurt.

Meeting with the staff to allow them to process the change verbally while also empathizing with the emotional upheaval they (and you) are undergoing will benefit both staff morale and will also help you process these same feelings. Use the tools of emotional intelligence as outlined in Daniel Goleman's work during this time. Focus on yourself, focus on others, and focus on the wider world, particularly through the lens of empathy,¹⁵ to help you and your staff regroup. If you express genuine concern for your staff, this will facilitate internal communication and lessen the probability of staff resentment about the change, particularly if the loss of the previous director was involuntary.

At the same time, maintaining a demeanor of calm during the aftermath of an abrupt change, including in your interactions with the library staff, will also benefit the organization by reassuring them that there is someone at the top who is prepared to move the library forward. In the process of doing this, however, you, as the new library administration, should be prepared that for most of the staff, a period of mourning will be necessary. This should be acknowledged at any initial meetings or whatever means of communication are used to explain the new library administration, particularly if the previous director did not have an opportunity to explain his or her departure before leaving. From the library staff's standpoint, having someone with these new responsibilities who demonstrates they are ready to stretch themselves in the interest of the library will provide better reassurance in times of uncertainty. If possible in your particular situation, let the staff know you will make yourself available via an open door policy if individual concerns need to be aired, particularly in the early weeks.

For the new director who has assumed that position unexpectedly, the first few days (and if possible, the first few weeks) should be used to triage any issues immediately facing the library. This will first include determining what the key priorities are (including any apparent ongoing issues with staff morale) resulting directly from the administrative changes. This should be followed by ascertaining if additional interim staffing changes are necessary to cover critical functions and acting on that evaluation. Consider the best means of continuing all key operations from a management perspective. Do you as the new director have sufficient knowledge to understand all the complexities of library operations or will you need assistance from others – and if so, from whom? It is imperative to keep lines of communication open to appropriate direct reports (and preferably all staff) and to utilize an existing management team or a newly created one. The make-up of this team should be useful to you as an advisory group and can consist of either top library administrators, or alternatively, cross-representational members among all levels of staff, including at least one library support individual. This team can be immensely helpful for you, as a new director, in dealing with specific issues affecting the entire library. Determine critical areas outside the library that you will need to work with and engage with the individuals in those departments during the first few weeks of the transition (e.g., human resources to assist in hiring temporary staff if needed to address gaps in library coverage).

Throughout this period, use existing networks (inside and outside the library) to expand your knowledge in places where you may have gaps or need assistance in rounding out your new level of responsibility. Finally, admit when you don't know the answer to a specific question and accept help when it is offered by someone within the library or elsewhere on campus (or even beyond) who is more knowledgeable about a specific aspect of your new administrative role. No one put into a new position of changed responsibility (expected or otherwise) is assumed to know all the nuances of that new job, and acknowledging your possible lack of

complete understanding will put you in better stead with your supervisees now (and in the long run) than pretending you know all the answers. Although these associated new tasks means juggling many things at the same time and realistically putting in many extra hours, successfully navigating these first few weeks will separate you as the library leader versus someone acting solely as a library manager in a caretaker position.

Most academic librarians are expected to be professionally active. Consider those experiences working with other librarians on committees or professional programming in formulating the best approach for verbal and written communication (type and frequency) within the library as well to the area on campus to which you report. If you have worked outside the library field, look back and select best practices from those experiences as well. Beyond the confines of the library, consider your various potential audiences first. What appropriate level and type of communication is needed and with whom should you interface? Be particularly mindful of keeping the lines of communication open with your new supervisor during this adjustment period. If some of the campus departments are new to you in your stepped up role, also reach out to them and establish a positive relationship since you are now the library's ambassador. During this outreach phase, determine who all your potential stakeholders are, when to engage them, how to engage them, and who could assist you during and after the transition. This early period is when the fine-tuning of your existing communication skills (verbal and written) will be of utmost importance.

Regarding your working relationships within the library, what has worked in the past for yourself as well as others you have observed (either in library work or any work experience)? What has worked best for you when you have been a colleague, a team or group leader, or perhaps a member of a group led by someone else? Do you appreciate being perceived as an equal by someone who technically ranks above you but has delegated a responsibility to you and given you the latitude to completely design an approach to arrive at the intended goal, or have you wanted specific directions or guidance? Is it a mixture? How well do you know each member of your staff to understand which approach will work best based on his or her personality? If your knowledge in this area is lacking, talk with his or her supervisor or better yet (if time permits) the staff person and determine the best approach rather than making holistic assumptions.

During the first few weeks of change, it's critical to remain open to all possibilities of implementing operational changes beyond the status quo as well as assessing potential ongoing issues in order to properly reprioritize needs or tasks that may have become more time critical. If there have been standing issues within the organization prior to the departure of the previous director, explore possible simple solutions to address the most important ones and make those changes. Engage your management team to expand alternatives in proposing possible solutions to outstanding concerns. This will further emphasize your commitment to improving a still uncertain situation in a positive and inclusive way. Longer term issues are not to be ignored, but they can be addressed eventually once the immediate crisis/situation has been adequately dealt with. This will have two benefits: possible solutions can be evaluated more fully with the assistance of appropriate members of the library staff, and they can also become part of a longer term plan to change the culture or organization of the library in a positive (and non-crisis) way.

It is also important during these early days not to revert to micromanaging behaviors and attempting to address all of your new responsibilities yourself. It is more appropriate and beneficial to you and your organization to delegate when appropriate and thus indicate the trust you have in those who now report to you. Micromanaging will be perceived not as a positive indication of your ability to take on all critical tasks, but rather that you are overwhelmed with

your new responsibilities and can't manage or lead.¹⁶ Rather than engender trust, it will discourage it at a time it is most critically needed to bolster staff confidence.

Finally, be prepared to experience some sense of personal displacement or emotional loss by virtue of the need to reinvent yourself in transitioning from peer to supervisor over those who you previously treated as equals. Being self-reflective and using emotional intelligence during this period will ease the change. As Christine Riordan notes, "How well we navigate these potentially treacherous junctures often determines our ultimate success – or failure – as leaders... This ability (or failure) to recognize, navigate, and make personal changes influences the effectiveness of leaders over time."¹⁷ The keys for making these transitions in the near term lie in your ability to remain agile, flexible, and adaptable to all the new challenges presented to you as the new library director.

Creating a More Lasting Plan

While addressing the immediate and most critical needs of a library organization that experiences a sudden change in leadership is of utmost importance, once the initial situation has been ameliorated, longer term aspects in taking on directorship responsibilities, even on an interim basis, are logically part of the overall adjustment process. Whether you remain in that leadership position for the medium or long term, establishing the building blocks of a sound library organization that works for your library, its culture, and your institution (or improving ones already in place) will benefit you no matter what your role might be following the unexpected leap to a director's position.

In a similar way in which the triage model works for the crisis period of rapid change in your library administration, i.e., serving to identify what is critical to address and what can be placed as a lower priority, and assuming you will retain the director role for a mid-range period of time (greater than six months), the next transitional phase can be used to determine what medium to longer term goals the organization could take on. As part of the initial steps in this process, determine the campus political climate so any new initiatives can be cleared in advance (if necessary) or alternatively should be dropped or put on hold. Any longer goals the library embarks on (three to five maximum) should be easily reversible or introduced as pilots in the event a new permanent director determines a different direction is necessary or desired.

Determine collectively what medium term goals could be trialed through a bottom-up process involving the entire library staff or, at a minimum, using the management team structure. This approach is useful in that it will incorporate the staff into the process (increasing your social capital and their trust in you), move the library forward in a positive direction, and indicate externally to others on campus that the library is not static, even if under an interim director. Once the goals have been approved through the proper channels, develop a plan to obtain the designated goals by establishing identifiable logical steps and measurable benchmark indicators to help the library determine if it is moving in the desired direction. If the steps to achieve that goal need adjustments, or if the entire goal needs to be revisited, collaborate and adjust the strategies accordingly. In a manner very similar to establishing personal goals (work-related or otherwise), break the work into smaller, easier-to-accomplish steps. By breaking goals into smaller steps, it is more likely you will get wider participation by the staff since they can more easily be a component of the entire goal. In addition, adopting this methodology will not cause goal setting to be perceived as another upheaval in a time when the library may still be in a state of flux. When appropriate, bring in others outside the library to obtain their buy-in and assistance as well. Along the way, ask for honest progress reports

without negative repercussions and convey that status to the rest of your staff regularly and to your supervisor for feedback.

As previously noted, identifying stakeholders can be an important part of bringing in organizational (or personal) allies. This is true in both short-term crisis situations as well as long term projects. These stakeholders may come from within the library's existing organization, in other academic departments on campus, and even beyond as a result of professional or social networking in the past.

At first glance, the universe of possible stakeholders may not be immediately apparent. Yet by applying larger, out-of-the-box thinking (which will most likely be more of an option once the critical period of adjustment has been dealt with), it is often possible to identify individuals who may have been of assistance in the past and may now be working (or have worked) as mentors, allies, and facilitators for additional initiatives or projects the library has or is prepared to take on. These stakeholders may not even have an obvious direct relationship with the library. However, but they may have connections to other individuals or parties who could be instrumental in actions the library undertakes, particularly if these actions are going to start tackling broader campus issues (e.g., scholarly communications, the pedagogical role of librarians on your campus, etc.) under your directorship. Bringing these champions into the fold will allow the library to work smarter and faster than might happen otherwise. This approach is also a sound piece in the construction of any kind of longer term strategic plan based on the new realities of the library organization during the interim period or after the permanent director is appointed.

As part of this stakeholder identification and internal goal setting process, use the institution's strategic plan in identifying library goals that align with institutional goals and also will allow for growth, a sense of progress and purpose, and can ultimately support the work of a new permanent director. In this way, the library staff will sense the organization is not in standstill mode; it will make their work (and yours) more interesting and will allow you to grow as a library leader. It will also encourage the flow of open dialog by tapping into your staff's existing expertise, including making use of any specialized skills of which you were previously unaware and which will benefit the library. Always keep in mind the necessity to, at a minimum, entertain new ideas, alter approaches, and remain flexible so that any unforeseen roadblocks can be addressed when or if they arise. These skills are also applicable far beyond setting library goals. They will also be valuable whether you remain as the permanent library director, go back to the duties as you had before, or have an opportunity to pursue a change outside of your current organization. Expanding perspectives can reap great benefits no matter what role you may have in your future as an academic librarian.

Conclusion

Abrupt high level changes in libraries are best handled by taking into account the specific circumstances surrounding the change and the personalities of all of those directly or indirectly involved. While you will need to personally process the changes, it is equally important as the new leader of your organization to maintain calm and employ logical steps to address the immediate challenges in the days to follow. Technical skills in these situations are trumped by attributes a focused leader should display that firmly demonstrate openness and inclusiveness and allow the library to process all the changes that follow. You can show you genuinely care about your organization by including others as much as possible during the initial decision phases and reiterating your receptiveness to suggestions. By recalling from your own professional past (as a librarian or otherwise) various approaches of personal interactions and

what worked and what did not, and by thinking critically and analytically about the best way forward, a sound plan will eventually develop.

Approaching the situation in a deliberative manner and paying close attention to your campus environment holistically will ease the library through the initial phase of shock and confusion and reassure the library's organization that together the library will be able to recover and move ahead. Once that base has been developed, you will have a chance to reflect more fully and move to the next phase of the overall transition process, one that should still reflect staff inclusiveness as much as possible, in order to continue the library's mission with a new sense of direction and purpose. Working through this entire process will reap benefits for your organization as well as your own personal growth.

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³ Irmin Allner, "Managerial Leadership in Academic Libraries: Roadblocks to Success," *Library Administration & Management* 22, no. 2 (2008): 69-78.

⁴ Steven W. Staninger, "Identifying the Presence of Ineffective Leadership in Libraries," *Library Leadership & Management* 26, no. 1 (2012): 1-7.

⁵ Jan Kemp, "Perspectives on Leadership - Interview with Mark Winston," *Library Leadership & Management* 24, no. 4 (2010): 183-185.

⁶ Shorlette Ammons-Stephens, Holly J. Cole, Keisha Jenkins-Gibbs, Catherine Fraser Riehle, and William H. Weare Jr., "Developing Core Leadership Competencies for the Library Profession," *Library Leadership & Management* 23, no. 2 (2009): 63-74.

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⁸ Daniel Goleman, "The Focused Leader," *Harvard Business Review* 91, no. 12 (2013): 51-60; Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer, "Emotional Intelligence," *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality* 9, no. 3 (1989-90): 185-211.

⁹ Ronald E. Riggio and Joanne Lee, "Emotional and Interpersonal Competencies and Leader Development," *Human Resource Management Review* 17, no. 4 (2007): 418-426, accessed May 15, 2016, doi:10.1016/j.hrmr.2007.08.008.

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