Leadership in Libraries: Theories and Competencies

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Abstract

The research in this paper aims to better understand leadership in libraries. The role of a library leader is to give meaning to a library's vision. To define leadership is ambiguous, so multiple theories are presented to offer ideas of how leaders may approach their role. To support the success of library leadership, the top three Leadership and Management Competencies (provided by the American Library Association) are examined for the benefit of professional development.

Leadership in Libraries: Theories and Competencies

The author of this research paper is interested in library leadership: what it means, how it is approached, and what it requires. The innovation needed for libraries to compete in the information landscape is dependent on its leaders (Germano, 2011). After a brief look at the role of library leaders, there will be an exploration of leadership theories and the top three leadership competencies designated by the American Library Association.

Library Leaders

It is helpful to first understand what makes a library leader. Library leaders motivate, focus on people, inspire trust, think forwardly, and do the right thing (Riggs, 2001, p. 6). Library leaders can be at branch, city, county, state, institutional, and federal levels; the structural scope of a library will define the leader it needs to meet its goals and strive to manifest its vision. It is worth mentioning managers and leaders are not synonymous, though it does not mean managers cannot be leaders or leaders cannot be managers. Managers are tasked to handle systematic routines, whereas leaders create a vision and motivate others to contribute toward achieving the vision (Phillips, 2014; Chow & Conte, 2021; see also Mason & Wetherbee, 2004). It may even be said good followers make good leaders, so long as the creation of meaning is a person's intent. The meaning of a library is the mission plus the vision. (Martin, 2019)

Leadership Theories

Literature on the topic of defining [library] leadership is ambiguous. "What is considered good leadership in one setting or organization may be considered bad leadership in another," and individual leadership styles will be perceived differently based on opinions of what a leader should be (Martin, 2019, p. 15). There is no one definition of leadership, but there are dozens of theories that may be applied to how leaders have developed an

understanding of their responsibilities from their own experiences. (Hernon, 2017; Martin, 2020)

Jason Martin's *Library Leadership Your Way* (2020) pre-conference presented ten leadership theories to encourage the attendees to discover their own definition of and approach to leadership (see Table 1). The variations and overlapping qualities of the philosophies are a great pillar of understanding--not only for the sake of personal development, but for the appreciation of leaders encountered in the real world--that demonstrate the ambiguity of leadership.

Table 1

Leadership theories from Jason Martin's Library Leadership Your Way

Theory/philosophy	Description
Theory X	Employees do not like work, must be monitored and extrinsically motivated
Theory Y	Employees find meaning in their work and will do the job because it fulfills them
Theory Z	Leaders provide stability for employees to induce loyalty
Contingency leadership	Not all leaders will make good leaders for all organizations
Situational leadership	Leaders adapt to employee abilities and needs; assigns tasks to appropriately challenge them
Leader-member exchange	Relationship with leader affects organizational outcomes; employees with stronger relationship receive leadership development
Transformational leadership	Four I's: 1. Idealized influence - act as a role model 2. Inspirational motivation - give work meaning within organization 3. Intellectual stimulation - encourage creativity 4. Individualized consideration - provide mentoring
Emotional intelligence	Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management
Authentic leadership	Being oneself to others; strong sense of self, service, compassion, values, relationships, and purpose
Servant leadership	Desire to serve before leading; builds trust in community through empathy, listening, openness, and foresight

Note: This table is a summary of ideas from Jason Martin's *Library Leadership Your Way* (2020).

The diversity of leadership perceptions can be seen in a hypothetical organization with a leader and two employees. The employees have the same job, but one employee has maintained the same position for over ten years, witnessed many changes in management, and regularly fights change; the second employee has worked for the organization for one year and is aimed to further their career into management. To the leader, the first employee embodied Theory X and required situational leadership; the leader valued the employee's experience, but would have to find ways to keep them satisfied with the work. The second employee expressed Theory Y characteristics and responded well to authentic leadership; the leader appreciated the employee's enthusiasm and, in response, felt more at ease when introducing new policies or procedures. The leader perceived themself as emotionally intelligent with a transformational leadership attitude, which enabled them to identify how their employees could best contribute to the vision of the organization.

Library Leader Competencies

In 2008, the American Library Association's (ALA) Library Leadership and Management Association (LLAMA) began compiling a list of foundational competencies for library leaders and aspiring professionals to reference for personal development and evaluation. The LLAMA Competencies Committee solidified 14 competencies in a 2016 survey of 282 LLAMA members, establishing the list currently used as a part of ALA's Core: Leadership, Infrastructure, Futures' Continuing Education sources. The 14 competencies are: communication skills, change management, team building (personnel), collaboration and partnerships, emotional intelligence, problem solving, evidence-based decision making, conflict resolution (personnel), budget creation and presentation, forward thinking, critical thinking, ethics, project management, and marketing and advocacy. Significantly, at least

half of the survey respondents selected communication skills, change management, and team building as core competencies. (ALA, 2016; ALA, 2020)

Communication Skills

The most important skill for library leaders is communication. Good communication skills are the basis for understanding, trust, and getting things done with and through people. "Communication is the transmission of meaning from one person to another or to many people, whether verbally or non-verbally" (Barrett, 2006, p.386); leadership communication is more involved: it must anticipate interruptions, appreciate contexts, understand audiences, and form messages in appropriate mediums. (Barrett, 2006)

Leadership communication itself requires an expansive amount of skills and can be broken down into three levels: core, managerial, and corporate. As seen in Figure 1, the core skills include strategy, writing, and speaking; these skills ensure a leader knows its audience and can confidently communicate effectively. The importance of communication as a library leadership competency is evident in Figure 1's spiral, as it also incorporates emotional intelligence, teams (team building), and media relations (marketing and advocacy).

Figure 1
The Leadership Communication Framework

Adapted from "Strong communication skills a must for today's leaders," by D.J. Barrett, 2006, *Handbook of Business Strategy, 7*(1), p. 387, Emerald Group Publishing Limited (https://doi.org/10.1108/10775730610619124). Copyright 2006 Emerald Group Publishing Limited

Change management

Libraries, like any organization, undergo change frequently due to globalization, information technology, and industry consolidation (Kanter, 1999). Change management is "an

environment open to innovation and collaboration by ensuring continuous two-way communication, flexibility, and willingness to learn from mistakes made, and by providing the training necessary to make the change happen" (ALA, 2020).

Many things can lead to change: partnerships, software, hardware, budgets, staffing, pandemics... what matters most is that change is seen as an opportunity, not a threat. Libraries that can withstand change are innovative, competent, and open to collaboration. To maintain a competitive advantage, library leaders should monitor the actions and words of their alliances and customers as indicators of future change. (Kanter, 1999; Moran & Morner, 2017)

Team Building (Personnel)

Leaders have followers, preferably a united team of individuals, that share common goals in support of a vision, mission, or purpose. A library leader may build a new team or inspire a preexisting one. In either case, a leader needs to use "powerful language, positive communication style, and nonverbal expressiveness" to present their vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2006, p.155).

Library leaders need a well-rounded team to bring their library's vision to life. When building a team, a leader should look to acquire individuals with technical, functional, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills. As well, personalities and presentation of self should be considered when making additions to a team.

Teams are beneficial for its members, not only its leader. A team that has the basic skills to perform well can see increases in creativity, productivity, learning, efficiency, and responsibility on individual levels. Team building also gives everyone a chance to show their strengths and potentially produce new leaders.

Conclusion

The most cited literature on library leadership would have one believe that it is an area unexplored and that its definition is elusive. However, there is one constant to focus on, and it is vision. As the world turns and technologies speed up, there will be curious librarians that grow into leaders and push for their wildest fictional dreams to become reality in their local library. Being mindful in public as a lifelong learner provides endless opportunities of experience. LLAMA's competencies do provide a set of guidelines for hopeful ladder climbers to adhere to, but theory is not practice. "A key issue for the profession now and in the coming years is building capacities to identify and develop current and next generation library leaders" (Stewart, 2017, p. 12). Leadership, in a library or otherwise, is a frame of mind.

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