

Giving Leadership Away

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Giving Leadership Away

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to counteract the vast amount of guff currently being produced about leadership. In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the volume of discourse on techniques, styles, models and philosophies of leadership. Taken as a whole its sheer bulk is very intimidating and therefore risks having a chilling effect on those information professionals who are interested in the topic.

Secondly, it seeks to defend library leadership from leadership philosophies imported from other fields. Contrary to various opinion pieces in recent literature, “library leadership” exists as quite distinct from other forms of leadership. We should advance our thinking about it just as we would our thinking about library spaces or library services.

Since the whole idea of library leadership is relatively recent, this would of course involve continuing to value ideas that had matured in other domains, such as servant leadership, or introspective leadership. However, it would also acknowledge that leadership in libraries has a unique contribution to make to a field far too dominated by military, political, sporting and other domains.

In a “sea of change” the capacity to give leadership away may, somewhat paradoxically, be one aspect of this unique contribution. In other words, for the library to be an effective laboratory or incubator at a time of rapid change, directors and others in leadership positions will want to get their egos out of the way of the many good ideas brought to them by their more capable and specialized colleagues. This is not an abdication of duty: accountability is unchanged, leadership has to be given away wisely, and there will still be plenty of it left to do.

Keywords

Library leadership, Reflective practice, Diversity, Sustainability, RACI chart, Responsibility assignment

Introduction

This essay is about **library** leadership.¹ It is not about other forms of leadership nor about other concepts that sometimes get muddled up with leadership, like governance or management. I think of leadership as it is often defined in its broadest terms, as the ability of an individual to influence a group to achieve a particular outcome.

This essay reflects my personal experience. My conclusions are grounded in a belief in the value of reflective practice. Others will have had different experiences and reached different conclusions.

I started to think a bit more about leadership when reflecting on my two years as President of the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL), which ended May 2015. CARL is a national association of the Directors of 31 major research libraries including the University of Alberta Libraries. It engages what I call “titled library leaders” – deans, directors, chiefs – in various national topics, and brings us together for in-person meetings twice a year.

I have also begun to think more about leadership because the University of Alberta Libraries is currently preparing to welcome 28 Library Leadership Fellows selected by member representatives of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). Our campus will host one of three week-long Leadership Institutes for the Fellows in September, 2016. ARL is a North American association based in Washington, DC, and includes 15 members of CARL. I am one of the advisors to the ARL Leadership Fellows Program, and the cohort includes two librarians from the University of Alberta.

Everyone a Leader.

First things first. Everybody unequivocally possesses the capacity for leadership. Furthermore, everyone is currently a leader in one or more aspects of their lives. Leadership in professional life is one small area of lived experience. It should, I believe, be enriched by experience of leadership in other aspects of life. Titled leaders like myself and others on Search Committees are often looking for evidence of leadership outside the profession when hiring into any position.

I strongly believe that we have a responsibility to ensure that no characteristics silently or unthinkingly prejudice us for or against a person's potential for professional leadership. Actually I think everybody's characteristics need to be recognized before we can move on from them. I was reminded of this last year when, as a member of the Diversity and Inclusion Committee of the ARL, we were all asked to describe ourselves on spectrums such as gender, age, nationality. It would be reductive to assign leadership theories to accidental traits; but it would be presumptuous to ignore them. We should acknowledge traits and move on from them. Personally I support the notion that some communities, or some people with certain characteristics, deserve more focused attention because they come from minority groups that have historically been denied titled leadership opportunities.

Everyone a Follower

We are all followers as well as leaders. There used to be a lot more books published on crowd theory than on individual leadership. I believe you cannot understand the main tragedies of the twentieth century without understanding something about why people follow other people. The twentieth century is much better understood by studying the motivations of its followers than those of its leaders

Leadership Literature

Leadership should not be an intimidating prospect though personally I get anxious when I see how much is being produced about it these days. In preparation for this essay I searched the University of Alberta's new open source catalogue using the subject heading "leadership". Not a very scientific inquiry I realise but please bear in mind I only wanted to get a rough idea of the scale of the topic. I was not actually doing research.

I retrieved over one and half million books, articles, video recordings, etc. Only 0.1% are pre-twentieth century. Over 170 were dated 2016 – and this was especially worrying since I performed the search before 2016 had even begun. Clearly, people are more than ready to continue a conversation about leadership, especially I think over the last decade or so.

There has just got to be a lot of guff in so many titles. What has given rise to this enormous growth in interest in the theory of leadership? I do not know for sure, but I think it has more to do with self-help than with organizational theory, and more to do with capitalism than democracy. A quick search on the internet tells me I can invest in the 7 habits of remarkably successful leaders, or the 9 habits of highly productive leaders, or the 12 habits of exceptional leaders. Clearly I need to have more habits. I can

even spend US\$695 on a video called “Giving Leadership Away”! A lot of this material is aimed at showing how we are able to become business leaders.

Library Leadership

Most would agree that libraries have been late to this discussion about leadership. Among the more than one and a half million titles listing leadership as a subject area, there are only about 27,000 items that claim to be about, or partially about, library leadership. The word “leadership” only got added to “management” in the title of the American Library Association’s Library Leadership and Management Association (LLAMA) in 2009. Leadership programs for academic librarians in North America are also quite recent.ⁱⁱ

I encourage library professionals to survey this literature – for example there are many interesting texts to be found in LLAMA’s publications, including its quarterly journal. However, I think of this essay as a preface, or breathing space, for those engaged in the topic. It is not a replacement and certainly not a summary, although I am not unfamiliar with certain concepts to be found: servant leadership, introspective leadership, the leadership pipeline, etc. I think these are good concepts. But I must confess I find the sheer volume of publications – even about library leadership – intimidating, and I am not sure I would have gone down the path to titled library leadership if I had known how much could be written about it. One of the jokes I make with myself is that I want to give leadership away because I do not know what it is.

Some say there is no such thing as library leadership. Steven Bell wrote one of his regular opinion pieces for the Library Journal in September 2013. He called it “There’s no such thing as Library Leadership”. He claimed to have spoken to two leading gurus on the topic, Maureen Sullivan and David Bendekovic, who agreed that, and I quote, “library leadership is more of a label than a vocation” and that “no form of leadership exists that is applicable only to the practice of librarianship”. He concluded his piece with the following:

“Wherever you may land on the issue of whether there is such a thing as library leadership, there is probably one thing upon which we can all agree. If you want to be a good library leader, you need to be a good leader who works in a library.” (Bell 2013)

So clearly I land somewhere different from Steven Bell on the question of library leadership. Also, I do not think you need to work in a library to be a good library leader – and I know library trustees who would agree with me. I think it is wrong to try and import the “good leader” concept from outside the library and apply it to our field. Leadership in libraries has a unique contribution to make to a field far too dominated by military, political, sporting and other domains. Importing the “good leader” concept from elsewhere is, I think, fraught with danger. You do not expect me to compare myself to Attila the Hun taking Rome, or Alexander the Great taking the Persian Empire, or Napoleon taking Egypt. Nor do you want me to adopt the philosophy of Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric for over 20 years, or Richard Branson of Virgin, or Elon Musk. Perhaps you would like your library to be a little more open to the ideas of your favourite political leaders – but if you are like me you will also fear political influence in library leadership because it runs so counter to the values we treasure, including academic freedom.

To me, saying library leadership does not exist is as wrong as dismissing the idea that there is something specific called “library space”, or “library service”. I get a little cross when I hear that library spaces should be more like Apple Stores, or Starbucks cafés; or that our services should be similar to high street bank services. If we talk about the library as a business, I think we deserve to be told that the library is a failed business. If it succeeds as a business, I am not sure it is a library.

Furthermore, if we deny that library leadership exists then you can be pretty sure some other form of leadership will occupy that vacuum. So I strongly believe that there is something called library leadership and that – at its best anyway – it is qualitatively different from non-library leadership.

So what is it? I am not sure I can tell you, but I am thinking that maybe I will learn more about it by giving it away. Not sharing it, not dividing it, not abdicating from it. Perhaps this is the central paradox: that titled leaders like myself do not necessarily know much more about leadership than what they have picked up along the way. One of the best and most compelling reasons to give leadership away, therefore, is to learn how other people use it.

Change

Another compelling reason in my opinion is change. I would argue that titled library leaders have only to listen to themselves to realise that they need give leadership away. We talk about change all the time. I do not know anybody in my position who got their job by saying they are going to keep everything the way they found it. But if we really listen to ourselves we surely realise that there is too much change needed in libraries for us to put ourselves at the head of it all. How sad it is when library leaders become bottlenecks! We wait for people to retire so that we can get things done after they have gone. Titled library leaders like myself should surely understand that only a little of the change necessary for libraries can possibly flow through us.

The main reason libraries and librarians know they have to change is because their society is changing. It is easy to list building blocks of our social fabric that are also undergoing rapid change: demographics, technology, education, scholarly communications, privacy, information. Given the amount of change we are experiencing right now, and given the amount of change which we want to be part of, it is an absolute imperative that titled library leaders do not seek to monopolise leadership. We absolutely have to give it away. I am going to note briefly three domains where we will gain by giving leadership away: expertise, diversity, and sustainability.

Firstly, it seems obvious to me that leaders cannot possibly be experts on all the issues that matter to libraries today. And why, if you are an expert, would you want to defer to a titled leader who knows less than you do?

Secondly, we should all know by now that decision-making is improved when it is informed by a diverse and inclusive group of individuals who have been given an appropriate space for free-ranging discussion. I do not think consensus works all that well in a culture that rewards risk. However, I do think everything about leadership is improved when it takes account of the need for a diverse and inclusive decision-making process. If we believe in diversity, then surely a natural corollary is that we believe in empowering that diversity. Empowerment has a lot to do with giving leadership away.

Thirdly, I believe we cannot achieve sustainability in our library services unless we repeatedly and systematically give leadership over them away to those who, we hope, will welcome or at least tolerate increasing levels of responsibility in their professional career paths. This is surely the essence of any learning organization.

Responsibility Assignment

I will now discuss my theme in the context of the so-called RACI chart, a well-known responsibility assignment matrix named after the initials of the four groups it asks project managers to identify, i.e., those who are Responsible, Accountable, Consulted and Informed. **Responsible** refers to those who do the work to achieve the task. **Accountable** refers to who is ultimately answerable for the correct and

thorough completion of the deliverable or task, and the one who delegates the work to those responsible. **Consulted** refers to those whose opinions are sought, typically subject matter experts with whom there is two-way communication; and **Informed** are those who are kept up-to-date on progress, often only on completion of the task or deliverable; and with whom there is just one-way communication.ⁱⁱⁱ

When I discuss giving leadership away I am, in RACI terms, talking about assigning responsibility to others. I mean true responsibility for any given task, and for me that means not just knowing who is responsible but also who may need to be supported in that task, who may need to be facilitated, who should be given resources, who needs to be protected from risk or unanticipated consequences. It is critically important to know that one cannot “give leadership away” to anyone that does not want it. It has to be a conversation, there has to be a degree of mutual trust. Titled leaders like myself have to be very careful about to whom they give leadership away, and on what understanding. Leaders do not get to be irresponsible by giving responsibility away.

No matter how much responsibility I give away, it is critical to know that accountability rests with me. We can spend a lot of time defining accountability but more or less it is the part of titled leadership that cannot be given away. A university or other authority should be able to hold its university librarian accountable for what happens in the library whether or not she is actually responsible for it. So my short definition of accountability is: that which a titled leader should not be allowed to delegate. That is another reason, of course, why giving leadership away has to be done very thoughtfully. Because the titled leader is going to be held accountable no matter who is responsible.

Now once a person or persons have agreed to be responsible for a project, or a task, or an area of the library, then to some extent a titled leader’s work is done. However, additional roles should also be considered for the sake of the health of the project and indeed the whole library. It is critically important to consider the groups that are consulted and informed in the RACI matrix. People often do not feel like they have been consulted or informed unless the Chief Librarian or her/his equivalent has been part of the communications plan. Giving leadership away – making others responsible – does not eliminate the need to consider all groups in the responsibility assignment matrix.

Open Data

On a final note, I want to suggest that libraries are well placed to construct a world in which “giving leadership away” gives the best results possible. Evidence-based practice flourishes best where the data supporting the evidence are universally available. Open data allows for better decision-making. It also enables any society or group of individuals to comment on outcomes and seek continuous improvement. Of course there are constraints on the use of open data in libraries, as in most organizations, but we are surely better placed than most professions to advocate for it and to implement it. I believe open data principles – like the concepts of expertise, diversity and sustainability – and like the idea of giving leadership away – should find a natural home in the library environment.

ⁱ I am grateful to Dr. Toni Samek, Director, School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS), University of Alberta, for the opportunity to present an earlier version of this essay to SLIS students in the School's Research Colloquium series.

ⁱⁱ E.g. the Association of College and Research Libraries/Harvard Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians; *Library Leadership in a Digital Age*, Harvard Graduate School of Education; ARL Leadership Fellows Program. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) is also starting up an International Leaders Programme.

ⁱⁱⁱ Source: Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Responsibility_assignment_matrix (Accessed: April 23, 2016)

References

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