Leading from the Side: The Role of Middle and Project Managers in Leadership Development

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THE ROLE OF MIDDLE AND PROJECT MANAGERS 
IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract
As senior leaders retire from academic libraries across North America, the profession is experiencing significant change and new opportunities for growth. Preparing the next generation of library leaders is crucial to the success and sustainability of our organizations. This paper will consider the role of middle and project managers in the leadership development of their colleagues.

Leading from the side or from middle management, with varying levels of authority, presents a variety of challenges and opportunities. Middle managers have frequent, direct contact with librarians and, through performance management, have opportunities to facilitate the professional and leadership development of their colleagues. Project managers have opportunities to work with colleagues at varying stages in their careers and across departments, broadening their network of influence. These leaders can build and sustain a culture where team members and direct reports are empowered to experiment with new initiatives and are encouraged to learn from successes and failures.

This paper will discuss how leaders in the middle of the organizational structure can help develop the leadership skills of their colleagues and direct reports through mentorship, peer-training, delegations, formal development programs, informal cohorts, and other strategies, sharing lessons learned from managing project teams and librarians.

Keywords: leadership development, middle management, project management

INTRODUCTION
As senior leaders retire from academic libraries across North America, the profession is experiencing significant change. Numerous vacancies provide sustainability and succession planning challenges while reorganizations and repurposing of positions create new organizational and leadership opportunities. Leadership development has been, and continues to be, a priority for academic library administrators (Rooney, 2010; Parsch & Baughman, 2010) as preparing the next generation of library leaders is crucial to the success and sustainability of our organizations. While there is no shortage of literature focusing on leadership development opportunities for middle managers and new and mid-career librarians, this paper will instead consider the role middle and project managers play in the leadership development of their colleagues.

LEADING FROM THE MIDDLE
Management and leadership are distinct, with areas of overlap. According to leadership expert John C. Maxwell (2011), “managers work with processes” while “leaders work with people” (p. 112). While not all good managers are leaders, most leaders are good managers (Maxwell, 2011, p. 113). When discussing leadership in academic libraries, there is a tendency to define leadership in terms of organizational structure and hierarchical positions. Academic libraries are frequently led by a “director or dean supervising an executive management team of assistant directors or deans, who in turn manage directors or department heads, and so on down the line. The people at the top of the organization chart are known, at least publicly, as the ‘library leadership’” (Bartlett, 2014, p. 1). Within this organizational structure, we identify positional authority with leadership at all levels. However, there are plenty of leaders in libraries who do not
occupy positions of authority or hold official titles. Pixie Mosley (2014) refers to these leaders as “grass roots leaders” (p. 5) while Joseph Janes (2014) defines them as people who are “guiding and shaping, moving things forward, articulating a vision and marshaling support for it, creating and innovating, doing something that likely otherwise wouldn’t be done. And from the ranks, without the benefit of - or need for - a title” (p. 18). Anyone, from any position in the organization, can be a leader. And, in the sense that every leader is accountable to someone else, every leader is leading from the middle (Farrell, 2014). Following this definition, leadership is about influence and involves a variety of skills and competencies. Mosley (2014) explains that “part of leadership is choosing the appropriate leadership behavior within the context of a particular situation or circumstances” and that “one cannot always describe [leadership] with the exact same set of behaviors” for this reason (p. 4-5). While some traits of good leadership are innate, other, more effective, leadership behaviours can be learned and developed (McKee, Boyatzis, & Johnston, 2008, p. 7). They constitute a set of tools to be used when needed. These behaviours, or tools, are just as necessary for informal, “grass roots” leaders as they are for positional leaders or leaders at the top of an organization. And, in order for leaders to succeed to, and at, senior management and leadership positions, they must develop their leadership skills throughout their careers.

Good leaders have strong emotional intelligence, strong moral values, vision, and the ability to listen, to inspire trust, and to communicate their values and vision in a way that motivates and inspires (McKee et al., 2008). Brain and behavioural scientist and leadership expert Daniel Goleman (2004), in his frequently cited article “What Makes a Leader,” argues that emotional intelligence is the most important leadership skill, that it is “twice as important as the others for jobs at all levels” (p. 84). The five components of emotional intelligence are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill (Goleman, 2004, p. 88). Each of these components can be developed over time, but require personal dedication and, frequently, the support of trusted colleagues. The first step in developing one’s leadership strengths is to want to change and to want to do the work (McKee et al., 2008, p. 7). Increasing self-awareness and identifying individual strengths and weaknesses are essential to developing leadership skills. There are quite a few formal opportunities to develop leadership competencies. There are several national programs such as the American Library Association (ALA) Emerging Leaders, the ALA Leadership Institute, and the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL)/Harvard Leadership Institute. Libraries may also offer training programs, bringing in external consultants or developing leadership programs using local resources. Participation in any of these programs requires a significant investment of resources and the number of participants is typically limited. Ensuring the resource investment benefits the organization as broadly as possible is an essential consideration.

Developing a library-wide culture of leadership development, where lessons learned in training programs or through individual study are broadly disseminated can help to address this concern.

Early to mid-career librarians with leadership aptitude often end up in middle and project management roles and should be encouraged to participate in leadership development activities. These managers are also in the optimal position of immediate, frequent contact with direct reports and colleagues across departments and levels within an organization. They are familiar with the daily challenges and intricacies of the work and projects happening across the library and are responsible for communicating information between their colleagues and administration (Cawthorne, 2010, p. 151). This frontline knowledge and accountability position middle and project managers to identify colleagues with leadership aptitude and to assist in their development. Maxwell (2011) argues that the key to successful leadership is to “lead in every direction,” to influence those above, below, and beside you, and that the “reality is that 99 percent of all leadership occurs not from the top but from the middle of an organization” (p. 1). If leaders in the middle of the organization are truly “leading in every direction,” they have not only the opportunity, but the responsibility, to develop the leadership skills of their colleagues.

Creating a culture that empowers these managers to not only make decisions, but to view themselves as responsible for the development and success of their colleagues is essential to preparing the next generation of library leaders. Pixie Mosley (2014) proposes that “an organization’s overall success is going to be dependent on the commitment, engagement, and culture found at levels well removed from the administrative suite and… peer-based leadership development may be what is more critically needed within organizational cultures to build grass roots leaders and move libraries forward” (p. 2). Empowering the leaders in the middle of an
organization to take active roles in the leadership development of their colleagues helps build a culture of shared leadership, where leadership is the responsibility of individuals throughout the organizational culture (Cawthorne, 2010), and of continual improvement. This is a culture where administration rewards experimentation and employees are encouraged to learn from both successes and failures in order to build their leadership toolbox. This is a culture that expects lessons learned from training programs will benefit the entire organization and that middle and project managers will use the skills and tools they develop from trainings to help develop their colleagues.

To develop others is to help them improve themselves in ways that apply to all aspects of their lives (Maxwell, 2011, p. 228-9). This is a skill that requires time, effort, and practice. It is challenging, but it is a valuable tool for any leader and every organization. Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman (2012) analyzed behaviours of 30,000 managers via 360-degree evaluations to identify a list of top ten mistakes of ineffective managers. Number eight on this list was the “failure to develop others.” Zenger and Folkman (2012) state that “leaders who were not concerned about helping their direct reports develop and were not seen as coaches or mentors were highly likely to fail… they were not concerned about the longer-term success of their employees or their department” (list section, number 8). Not only are managers in the position to engage in development activities, they should do so in order to be effective managers and leaders. Middle managers, specifically, are in a position of authority over direct reports and can therefore play an active role in the leadership development of the individuals they supervise. Project managers, while in a position of nominal authority over a project team, must approach leadership development with an influence strategy. The teams that project managers lead may be comprised of individuals from across library departments and at various career stages. In either case, managers must develop and maintain trusting relationships with colleagues in order for colleagues to want to develop their leadership skills in collaboration with the manager.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

Coaching is one of the most challenging yet powerful strategies in any manager’s skillset. Coaching involves “having a deep conversation with an employee that goes beyond short-term concerns and instead explores the person’s life, including dreams, life goals, and career hopes… that focuses on personal development rather than on accomplishing tasks” (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013, p. 60). This involves a series of conversations, held over time, in a high-trust relationship. Managers must get to know their colleagues to develop this relationship and to develop a customized coaching strategy that will work for the individual. Coaching relationships where the coach cares about the personal development and success of her colleague are most successful. Boyatzis, Smith, and Beveridge (2012) encourage coaching with compassion, a process where the coach “notice[s] another’s need, feel[s] empathic concern for the other person, and actively respond[s] to enhance his or her well-being” (p. 159). Compassion or caring are crucial components to developing a coaching relationship focused on leadership development.

Self-awareness and reflection are essential to personal development. Self-awareness means one can be “honest with themselves about themselves,” about their emotions, actions, and motivations as well as “honest about themselves with others” (Goleman et al., 2013, p. 40). A critical component to successful coaching towards enhanced self-awareness is the art of asking questions that encourage colleagues to focus their attention on specific behaviours, feelings, and competencies and how these impact one’s work. Kouzes and Posner (2012) assert that questions “develop people. They help people escape the trap of their own paradigms by broadening their perspective and forcing them to take responsibility for their own viewpoint” (p. 82). Carefully crafted questions heighten self-awareness and help colleagues learn and grow by analyzing successes as well as failures. Formal training opportunities afford an easy starting point for coaching conversations. When staff attend leadership training activities, ranging from webinars to local workshops or national institutes, managers can follow up on the leadership topics. Inquiring about major takeaways encourages reflection and identifies individual priorities. Asking staff what they intend to apply to their work practice, and continuing to follow up with the individual, help develop a culture where training is not just a one-off situation, but lessons learned are worked into daily performance and supervisory conversations over time. For example, a manager may inquire what an individual learned at a facilitation skills training and how they will apply it to an upcoming project.
management role. Alternately, after a project management training, one might question what communication strategies an individual plans to use with a particularly challenging team project to ensure a trusting, engaged culture. This strategy provides a lens through which to examine and develop the individual’s experiences long-term.

Providing constructive feedback is another important element to a coaching relationship. Kouzes and Posner (2012) suggest that good feedback “needs to be specific, not general; focused on behavior, not on the individual (personality); solicited rather than imposed; timely rather than delayed; and descriptive rather than evaluative” (p. 85). Providing this type of feedback is essential to maintaining a high-trust, communicative relationship, where project team members, colleagues, and direct reports know they have the opportunity to fail, to learn from failure, and to develop their competencies in a safe environment. Feedback can run both ways in a coaching relationship. Middle managers may solicit feedback on their coaching style, which encourages both parties to reflect on, and learn from, the process. Also, regularly soliciting feedback on project team meetings and work encourages team members to engage in constructive, reflective thinking about both the product and the process. Asking team members to comment on both strategies that are working for them and changes they would like to see allows the team to collectively learn from successes and failures while providing opportunities to course-correct before a project runs awry.

Having identified leadership strengths and weaknesses, managers can also coach colleagues to create personal leadership visions and long-term development goals. According to McKee et al. (2008), “leadership abilities are tied to patterns of behavior related to self-image, relationship skills, and even worldview… when we have a picture of a future we really want, we discover a path for change and the energy and enthusiasm necessary to sustain the process of reinventing ourselves” (p. 8). There is no one-size-fits-all approach to creating a development plan and a manager must work with individuals to customize plans that build on the strengths of the individual and are appropriate to individual work responsibilities. Another important aspect is the manager’s ability to coach colleagues on navigating organizational culture and politics in order to succeed. Encouraging reflection on how well an individual’s values align with organizational values while identifying opportunities for, and barriers to, professional success is essential.

It is important to remember that coaching strategies that work with one person may not be effective with another. Managers need to take the time to get to know their colleagues, to identify what motivates them and to learn how they prefer to communicate. Coaching works best when everyone involved is clear about the responsibilities and expectations of both the coach and the colleague (Goleman et al., 2013, p. 61). Coaching will work better with staff who are invested in development and are open to this type of relationship.

Another important strategy for middle and project managers is to model the leadership skills and behaviors they hope to develop in their colleagues. These leaders must also study and develop their own competencies. They must model their personal leadership values as well as understand and model the values of the organization. Maxwell (2011) states that leaders “set the tone and the pace for all the people working for them. Therefore, they need to be what they want to see” (p. 243). Engaging team members and developing buy-in is important for the success of any project. In addition to understanding the project charge and steps to accomplish the charge, it is vital that team members feel empowered and valued. A project manager who models effective facilitation and devotes time to team-building and creating a safe culture that encourages creative thinking and constructive questioning is creating this culture but is also creating an important learning opportunity. Modeling applies to all aspects of a leader’s professional life and will hopefully inspire his or her colleagues. Leaders who are middle or project managers also serve as role models for newer librarians who pay close attention to their behaviors as they acculturate to the organization.

For modeling to be most effective, managers can “pull back the curtain.” They may discuss their application of relevant skills or strategies, explaining why they selected a specific strategy or what they hope to accomplish. For example, a project manager who takes the time to prepare for meetings, sending out agendas and preparatory work a few days ahead of the meeting might explain to her team that she is providing enough time and information for all team members to prepare to contribute during the meeting. By setting this expectation and providing the materials and time, the project manager engages team members who might need extra time to read and process information before contributing. Explaining this serves to encourage buy-in, but also
teaches team members a potentially new strategy for community-building and encourages them to think about how they and their colleagues process information differently.

Delegation is another useful strategy for middle and project managers. For delegation to be a development opportunity, a manager must give “employees challenging assignments that stretch them, rather than tasks that simply get the job done” (Goleman et al., 2013, p. 61). This may involve a manager giving a direct report a challenging new project or transitioning the individual to a leadership role on a project in order to apply specific leadership competencies. Project teams also offer opportunities for team members to develop new skills through delegation. Team members may want to play to their strengths, but encouraging new roles or tasks that challenge existing skillsets or perspectives is an important part of delegation for development. When delegating tasks in either situation, a manager should ensure the team member has the support he or she needs. This may require additional training on new tools or processes as well as coaching. Taking the time for one-on-one meetings to help the team member reflect and learn from successes and failures along the way is a crucial aspect of this learning process. Sharing the manager’s own experiences and lessons learned from similar challenges can also be a productive development tool.

Leaders from the middle of any library organization can work to build a culture of collaborative, shared leadership development. Project and middle managers interested in leadership development for themselves and their colleagues may find it useful to create informal cohorts to discuss leadership topics. This can take many forms, ranging from discussion groups to more structured communities of practice where leaders identify topics of interest, readings, and facilitate sharing of experiences and lessons learned. These groups can be immensely beneficial as they encourage reflection and collaborative learning that can transcend hierarchical roles. They are a relatively easy, low-maintenance professional development opportunity. The only limit to the number and composition of these groups is time and interest, but they go a long way to building a culture of shared leadership and professional enrichment that can transcend hierarchical or departmental boundaries.

A reciprocal, one-on-one mentorship relationship with other middle managers or peer-leaders in the organization is another option for informal training. Partnering with a fellow manager to regularly discuss individual leadership topics, like emotional intelligence competencies related to management and project management, or other scenarios can be a rewarding experience. Alternately, leaders may extend themselves as a resource to new project managers. In libraries, project management roles are often used as leadership development opportunities (Mosley, 2014, p. 2). When colleagues experience project management roles for the first time, they may benefit from a mentoring opportunity. Taking a colleague for coffee to congratulate them on their new role may result in an informal coaching and development relationship. Sharing experiences, tips, and lessons learned about planning, generating buy-in, delegation, facilitation, and other relevant strategies can be helpful. It may also encourage new project managers to consider aspects of the role they may not have otherwise. Extending oneself as a friendly resource can build a new mentoring relationship and opportunity to coach a new project manager through the process, acting as a sounding board for ideas and helping the project manager identify and solve issues as they arise. If the experience is positive for the new project manager, they may continue the precedent set and mentor another new project manager in the future. This is also another way to model the manager’s commitment to the leadership development culture (Boatright, 2015, p. 351-3). When managers take the initiative to establish these relationships and practices, they contribute to building and maintaining a culture of professional and leadership development, one person at a time.

Formal, structured development programs are another strategy. These programs require administrative support and significant resources to develop and maintain. They can vary in type and structure. For example, the University of Saskatchewan developed a library leadership development program (LLDP) where cohorts define leadership and engage in modules that cover leadership and relationship building, team building, leading change, organizational culture and other topics over a series of two-day sessions (Williamson, 2009). The program offers opportunities for practical application, reflection, and peer-coaching (Williamson, 2009). Meanwhile, the California State University, Long Beach implemented a structured Resource Team Model (RTM) for mentoring new librarians to help them acculturate and develop select leadership skills (Bosch,
Ramachandran, Luévano, & Wakiji, 2010). Regardless of the structure, these programs can be developed with input from middle and project managers who may be most familiar with the leadership needs of the organization.

CONCLUSION

Middle and project managers have not only the opportunity, but the responsibility to help build and maintain a culture of leadership development. They have an important role to play in the development of their colleagues through a variety of strategies and opportunities. Whether middle and project managers are engaging in formal or casual leadership development activities with their colleagues, it is essential that individuals and organizations identify strategies that fit within their culture. It is also important that these leaders share the lessons they learn from their experiences with library administrators in order to identify training and resource needs and to help develop a library-wide culture of leadership development. Middle and project managers can model, mentor, and coach colleagues through their frequent interactions. If these leaders take the time to intentionally work on developing these skills with their colleagues, they are in a position to actively, continuously focus on leadership development and to train the next generation of leaders.
References


