

OLAQ

Volume 24 , Number 2 *Lots of Ways to Be a Leader* | Pages 22 - 25

11-21-2018

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Little, M. (2018). Building the Ladder: Developing Leadership Skills Without the Title. *OLA Quarterly*, 24(2), 22-25. <https://doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1943>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Building the Ladder:

Developing Leadership Skills Without the Title

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MELISSA LITTLE is the Circulation Manager for the Beaverton City Libraries. She started her professional life in social work. She then moved to bookstore management for ten years. Finally, seeing a profession that combined her love of lifelong learning with service to the community, she sought a career in libraries. Her first job was working on the bookmobile at the Anaheim (CA) Public Library. From there she became the Assistant Manager of Circulation and Customer Service at Palos Verdes (CA) Library District. After receiving her MLIS from San Jose State University, she secured her current position as Circulation Manager at the Beaverton City Library. In her spare time she loves exploring the beautiful Pacific Northwest, crafting, and reading.

The leap to library leadership can be difficult if you have no experience in supervision. While larger library systems may have a deep structure that allows employees to start on step one of the ladder and progress one rung at a time to that director position, most of us in Oregon work for smaller libraries where there are few or no successive steps between circulation clerk and director. In these types of organizations, how does someone gain the experience necessary to make one a viable candidate for the job? Because of the diversity of functions from library to library and position to position, experience with a specific set of tasks really does not assess someone's success in a job. The viable candidate, especially in supervisory positions, does not necessarily have a specific operational skill set as much as a set of characteristics that will help one succeed as a leader.

There is a distinction between management and leadership. While both are necessary, management tends to focus on hard skills while leadership is more about the soft skills. Leadership establishes a direction for the organization by creating a vision, by aligning people to the vision through superb communication and team-building skills, and by motivating and inspiring the team to follow the vision (Kotter, 2008). Managers plan and budget, establish rules and procedures, develop incentives, and take corrective action. John Kotter (2008) separated the two in this way: management produces order and consistency; leadership produces change and movement. While libraries tend to value order and consistency, those individuals who can produce change and movement will be of the most value to the 21st-century library.

For this reason, one of the most important character traits of strong leaders is adaptability. In 1998 Beloit College began compiling the Mindset List to highlight the differences in the experiences of contemporary college freshmen compared to those of their predecessors. The most recent for the class of 2021, the last class to be born in the 20th-century, points out that this class:





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“... can’t remember when a “phone” wasn’t a video game and research library. ... They have persevered in a world without Joe DiMaggio and brightened by emojis ... If you ask them about the whine of a dial-up modem, expect a blank stare.” (McBride, Nief, & Westerberg, 2018)

When you review these Mindset Lists over the years, the changes to our culture and the methods by which society seeks information become starkly apparent. Consequently, organizations that want to keep pace with the rapidity of change will seek out leaders who not only can keep up with those changes but help others to do the same. When a supervisor wants to help their team work through a change, they always seek allies to help them ease the rest of the group through the transition. Being an ally to change in the organization allows one to model leadership for their team and demonstrates adaptability to their supervisors. If, for example, your library is adopting a new ILS or other software that will impact how staff provides services, offer to be part of (or better yet coordinate) a group of users to work through the kinks, create training documents, and assist co-workers in learning the new system. If changes will impact your patrons, develop talking points for your team to help them explain the need for change. These actions will demonstrate to your supervisor that not only do you adapt well, but that you acknowledge that others may not be as comfortable with change and that you have the ability to assist others through the transition.

The examples above involve another characteristic of great leaders: initiative. Shannon Schreiber Associates, in their *Leading from Any Position* workshop, do an exercise that brings home this idea to participants. In it, people are asked to think about things they personally can do to improve their organization in various ways (e.g. improve efficiency, cut a cost). Those with a leadership mindset think in this way while the majority wait for someone else to improve the situation. Rather than going to your supervisor and complaining that you never have the supplies you need at the service desk, step up and create an inventory of everything needed to give great patron service at the desk. Once finished, present it to your supervisor, and offer to be the person who ensures those items are there. Rather than complaining to your co-workers about how your library destroys the environment with paper waste, make a list of ways to save paper and share it with your director. While you may not work in an organization where you can take the initiative to create new programs or services, even simple things that take ownership of a problem rather than push it off to management demonstrate your willingness to lead.

Strong advocacy skills are another quality desired in leaders. The benefits of strong library advocates were evident when federal funding for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) was restored in the last two budget cycles after initially being removed. Advocacy skills can be practiced no matter what role you currently play in your organization. Develop an elevator pitch. When someone asks about library relevance in the digital age, dazzle them with a story or two about how your library has transformed members of the community. Attend budget meetings, learn about the process for funding your institution, and learn about your legislators. If the politicians controlling your





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funding have a pet cause, help them make the connection to that cause. Learn about your community's needs and advocate for the creation of programs that fill those needs.

Successful leaders exhibit another trait: a desire to learn and grow. Great leaders help to create a learning culture and model that curiosity to learn. As stated earlier, libraries vary widely on the skills necessary to complete the daily work. In order to successfully move up the ranks, a willingness to learn new things will almost always ensure your value to your organization. Seek out training in areas where there might be a deficit in your organization. Would grant writing skills be helpful? Maybe website development skills would be beneficial? There are a multitude of resources available for learning new skills and many of them at no charge. For example, www.webjunction.org compiles a monthly list of free webinars of interest to library staff. This source is just one of many available. If you are lucky enough to work for an organization with a training budget or reimbursement for staff to take courses, take advantage of those resources to develop skills that you may not get a chance to learn in your current role. Once you have completed your learning, find methods to put it into practice. Offer to take on a project that will use your new skills.

While these characteristics will help you get recognized in your own organization as someone destined for leadership, you may need to look outside your organization for promotional opportunities. Proving you are an appropriate candidate for a position may be tougher. While forward-thinking organizations know that leadership qualities are more elusive and management skills can be trained, many in charge of hiring focus on task expertise or previous job titles or duties. In addition to using your current job to develop the traits sought by hiring managers, look for other opportunities to get the experiences you seek. As libraries see the benefit to patrons in developing relationships with other service organizations, becoming a member of one of those organizations is a great way to not only establish a partnership but to also get experiences that are possibly not available in your current job. Additionally, the Oregon Library Association offers many opportunities to develop management and leadership skills. Becoming active in a division, committee, or round table allows for the attainment of experience frequently sought by hiring managers. By going a step further and chairing a group, you expand your skill set even more.

In addition to developing skills through these outside interests, you will develop a network to assist you in finding that next-level position you seek. OLA especially can help you meet leaders within the library community who can give you advice and mentorship. You will learn more about other institutions and gain some understanding of which organizations strictly require job experience and where your competencies fit best.

When you begin seeking new job opportunities, a functional resume will be the best method to showcase the hard skills the employer seeks. Unlike a chronological resume which lists job titles and duties of the job, a functional resume focuses on your skills and experiences. It highlights those accomplishments achieved due to an ambition to be a leader. While you can list your job title and description, you can also highlight special projects accomplished for that organization. In addition to noting your involvement in





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OLA or other service organizations, detail what accomplishments you had, committees on which you served, or initiatives which you led. Additionally, a cover letter that explains how your combination of management and leadership traits meets the needs of the hiring organization will help them to connect the dots. Furthermore, take the time to learn about the organization and tailor each resume and cover letter to showcase the skills that most closely match the needs of that particular organization. If you can connect with a current employee to get more information about the organization and culture, do so.

Often the road to leadership can seem long, winding, and without guideposts. However, there is a truism which, paraphrased, applies: leadership is a journey, not a destination. Seek out professional experiences that will enrich your life as well as your resume. Develop working relationships that will not only help your career, but will also bring you enjoyment. Understand that developing adaptability and resiliency will not only strengthen you as a leader, but brings along with it greater contentment. 🐼

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