

To Lead and Follow: Librarians Take It On

Leadership and Change. Can we get enough of these two terms in librarianship today? Wherever we turn, there they are: in the literature, at every conference, each day in our libraries. Doesn't it seem at times that we are guessing or wondering who is the leader?

I may be biased, but I think that the various library organizations in Illinois are communicating less to each other now than at any other time I have experienced over the past eighteen years. So many islands building up and with so little common ground. It is not a good situation when resources are not as abundant as they once were on several fronts. Each group, developing on its own, silo after silo, must then produce a magnificent mountain or risk becoming insignificant statewide.

It is not that we have no leaders and it is not for a lack of change that we are perhaps not cooperating as effectively as possible. Could it be that our leadership styles have undergone such scrutiny as of late, particularly with the national and state political elections on the minds and lips of everyone for months now?

The Illinois State Library has just announced the new SYNERGY Class of 2008. Those thirty librarians will soon be exploring more closely what it means to be a leader, analyzing the challenges and evaluating the rewards. As they mature with the concepts, I am sure they will more fully understand that change is the best test for effective leadership.

LEADERSHIP

Leaders are continually tested. Whether it is keeping the ship on course or knowing when to turn or change directions, the leader often is relied upon to make the call and live by their decision.

A couple of weeks ago, I noticed the following quote as a byline on a colleague's e-mail: **"There they go! I must hurry after them for I am their leader."**¹ I had not expected to think much about it, but after a chuckle, I decided there was more to this than first appeared. My initial vision of the leader scurrying along to keep up, a leader out of touch, quickly turned to the vision of a proud leader wanting to share a triumphant moment with protégés and colleagues — more of a mentor relationship.

Mentoring is an integral part of leadership and it can take many forms. They say that leaders must have some followers. I am not sure that is absolutely true — often leadership duties are shared to such a degree that it becomes hard to place a hat on the leader. The role can and should bounce around in a library. Who is best at leading planning exercises may not be the best at handling patron complaints and concerns; who is best at designing exhibits may not be the best at balancing the accounts.

We must constantly discern who is the official voice or leader of a library from who is actually the leader for specific functions within the library. The dean or director of an academic library is the head librarian, but does not take the lead role in all aspects of the library. It falls to other librarians and paraprofessionals to lead from where they are within the organization, providing direction and form, molding while mentoring others who may help accomplish the overarching goals of the library.

I am convinced there are many leaders in a library, often irrespective of departmental or shift designations. I encourage persons to become the expert, to take the lead, build a team of supporters, lessen the burden of others within reason, and outdo themselves when the next opportunity arises. This stimulates personal development, teamwork, goal achievement, and many other attributes that lead to success.

¹Although it is stated that the great thinker Anonymous had said this, *The Quote Verifier: Who Said What, Where, and When* by Robert Keyes (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2006, p. 161) attributes the similar quotes of "There go the people. I must follow them, for I am their leader." and "I am their chief. I must follow them." to various persons, including Alexandre Ledru-Rollin in Revolutionary France, Benjamin Disraeli, Gandhi, and James Michael Curley.



CHANGE

Most everything in libraries has recently changed, including the attitudes of the librarians, board members, staff, patrons, and administrators. So we obviously keep talking about change. Isn't it old press by now, like the ho-hum untalented, sexy, famous icon brats? Maybe not.

Be a change agent. Embrace change. Morph. Stay flexible. Yeah, yeah, yeah!

Change is not kind; it is not comfortable. Yet libraries are about change. Looking back, some library duties seem to have changed very little: reader services, collection building, hiring the right people, and such. Technology has pulled the plug on all that, enlarged the pond, and we see no way to stop the flood of changes that nudge or push us each year.

We no longer flinch when we get the invoice for new computers, printers, and scanners. Expectations have changed; we all want and deserve the best. What were considered major decisions a decade ago that now seem so simple — like going to the grocery store for bread and milk (notice, I didn't say to the gas station!). Think about the thousands of dollars needed each April for technology upgrades, the requests for scanning spaces on the third floor, or the expectation that color copiers will appear throughout the library. Wait! I did flinch on that last one!

We are blessed in Illinois with so many recent changes to the physical homes of libraries. Although we lament the damage caused to some sister libraries in recent strokes by Mother Nature, we have faith that those libraries are going to become better for the experience. Several communities and universities have recently invested in new homes for their libraries and

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patrons, and many more renovations are in the works. These are the best and worst of times for leaders. Rapid and multiple changes become mixed blessings for their leaders: dream, plan, design, pack, move, unpack, review all services, arrange flowers, choose the wine, smile a lot, plan your opening ceremonies — the list never stops and the work can stockpile unless leaders are identified for all the tasks affiliated with the opening of a new library.

With so many responsibilities for leaders and so many changes embraced by our profession, it is still worthy to seek closer ties with our colleagues across the state, ensuring that all the bases are covered at least down the interstate rather than duplicating the efforts locally or lamenting the absence of expertise down the hall. We have long said that no library could collect everything, yet it appears that we are changing our minds about that in the newest electronic age. As leaders, we have incredible options ahead of us. Let's hope we can rely on the host of Illinois library leaders to promote libraries as a whole. Illinois has beautiful silos already; let our libraries and professional organizations take renewed interest in building essential bridges to cooperation. **ILA**