Leadership In Action: Leading, Learning, And Reflecting On A Career In Academic Libraries

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For thirty years I have been involved in the concepts of leadership in libraries... What does it look like, how do we recognize, nurture, develop, reward it..
When I was invited to do this presentation – more than a year ago – I was a little surprised as I don’t ever talk about leadership – although I think about it just about every day – so I thought it might be an interesting opportunity for me to collect my thoughts and share them

I am going to share my views by telling my story -- how I experienced it over the years – what I learned – how I learned it.. and since I have been around awhile – it should cover any point you might be in your career.. since I started on a reference desk doing ILL as a library assistant.. and have worked in all kinds of positions ..on the line – as a middle manager – as a senior administrator
And just so you can get a sense of who I am – or at least, how I view myself, I am currently in a place where I see myself as a choreographer – I work with talent – and sometimes those talented people are focused on their individual performances that could appear disorganized and disjointed to the external audience – but we know they are not. But each has a place on the stage to demonstrate her or his expertise.
Sometimes the choreography is a pattern showcasing individuals each with a unique strength.
And still other times the cohesion of the group is what is front and center...
I love Alvin Ailey and never in my life did I think I would get to use images from those performances..

My role? To see the whole— to hire and nurture and support the talent – to help them work together and individually for greatness...
But that’s how I see myself now.. And there was a long path to getting here as I am fairly senior in my career..

So I want to talk about four things...
1. The importance of self awareness
2. What I call learning from the good, the bad, the ugly - Leadership lessons along the way
3. Leadership at all levels in the organization
4. And finally, Positional power and leadership
I have been lucky to have some amazing mentors over the years – and others who might not think of themselves as a mentor – but from whom I learned -- and I learned as much about myself... self awareness is an essential part of leadership – understanding your strengths, weaknesses, stress points, -- how others perceive you – how your style affects others and their style affects you.. I never ever stop learning about myself – or pass up an opportunity to remind myself how other perceive me and how I can improve my relationship with them...

----so that is where I want to start – with self awareness... not about your skills – but about your style...

I worked with Maureen Sullivan back at Yale in the early 80’s – so I was lucky to be in an organization that paid attention to organization development – and where I first started taking some of these instruments to help with self awareness.. 30 years ago I took my first Myers-Briggs – and we did it as a department as well so that we could develop some self awareness about our own styles and preferences – as well as that of our colleagues (never forget when we did this in the reference department – I was the only person who wasn’t an F..

But I will never forget the light bulb that went off – I had a friend in my previous position at Tufts who once took me aside and said that the circulation staff thought I wasn’t friendly because I would always run past them without saying hi.. They thought I was being elitist or a snob – I was a Yalie and a library assistant at the time .. But I was just being focused and in a hurry – and insensitive to the impression I was making.. I learned to slow down... and when I took this for the first time – and saw how those who are stronger in F perceive me – I
made it a habit to do what I call (fake an F) – I pause – slow down – make time – because it is important for people -- I am task oriented so I turned the friendly chit chat that an organization needs into a task – and hopefully it became a habit for life.. (although when I go to my stress place – it remains my weakness and I have to remind myself to make the time to walk around the organization and chat with people, ask them about their work, praise them informally...
So whether it is Myers Briggs where I am an action oriented strategic thinker who takes charge and challenges people and structures -- or DISC where I am action and results oriented who generates enthusiasm and values collaboration
Or in the Harvard Leadership Institute Reframing model where my natural preference is to function in the symbolic political frame
Or the Whole Brain model where I tend to the conceptual and analytical...
What I learned early on and continue to believe is that need to have self awareness to work on those other areas that don’t come as naturally
And most important, leadership comes in all styles --- we need to be true to ourselves while having respect and appreciation for those with a different style.. sounds easy – but its not – it doesn’t come naturally –

... don’t just hire in your own image
...don’t try to force others to have your style because of course it’s the best one
...or to favor those with your own style
..create spaces that celebrate differences

This is part of the celebration of diversity in the workplace

I love my structural, C, green colleagues – I surround myself with them – they complete me... they keep me honest – ensure I have the data – slow me down to insert a bit of pragmatic realism to my lofty ideas –and I hope I inspire them and am a strong advocate for them and for the Libraries – telling the stories of who we are, what we do, why we make a difference, and why we need to be supported – with their data and analysis as part of that story telling...

I appreciate my red, F, human resource people because they remind me to pause and be personal – to say thank you more – to demonstrate appreciation before moving on
to the next challenge – to put morale on my list as a continual focus..
And I like doing these workshops every so often – not just for my organization – but for myself --- to remind myself that while I might enjoy meetings to talk and brainstorm, but I am in an organization where 65% of the staff want a detailed agenda with supporting documents and discussion questions in advance so that they can read and synthesize and reflect and formulate and come prepared... and that walking into a space and asking some of them to have an opinion off the top of their head is stressful and will only lead to a quiet room... even if we do a think-pair-share activity.
I want to tell you a little about my journey – I was once told that I am a self-directed learner – basically learning from any environment whether good bad or downright ugly .. I actually believe that is true with most people – it is what forms our perceptions and opinions..
Let's start with the vision thing. Early on I had the privilege of working for a great visionary. Passed away a long time ago. He was brilliant, a futurist, and very conceptual and abstract. But what I observed was that he couldn't communicate the vision. Many found him hard to follow and didn't understand what he was saying or why he was saying it. They didn't see its relevance to them...
From that experience I learned that no matter how special you are, you are not leading if no one is following.
Then there was the director who was visionary – inspirational – and a great communicator... she expressed the vision in ways that made her staff want to be part of it – she used lofty language and was a great external spokesperson..
From her I learned the importance of process – that it’s not enough to have a vision and be able to communicate it – but the hardest part is creating an environment in which the vision is shared – in which each can see how they contribute – linking each person’s work to the library overall – and placing the library within the context of the campus.
But I learned something else from her – that leadership is not management... that it is still not enough to have forge the vision, communicate it, create a space for it to be shared... that leaders need to pay close attention to the day to day work environment – the training of supervisors and middle managers, having sound infrastructure; managing budget, IT, space... to ensure that resource allocation is intentionally aligned with visioning.. the leader cannot abdicate the management infrastructure because it is the oil that keeps the organization running..
From another organization I learned about leadership style... and that is where self awareness and reflection continues to be the most important factor.

I was in an organization with a director who had a very, very different style from my own – I would say the opposite.. He was quiet, introverted, very uncomfortable speaking in public, non confrontational.. He communicated best in writing – and he was very analytical and data driven..

At first he made me uncomfortable. It was more than 25 years ago and I hadn’t yet learned to recognize or appreciate different leadership styles at the top... all my previous models for directors were outgoing, verbal, visibly energetic extroverts..
From him I learned that if you hire talent, have a vision that they share, you then stay out of their way and help them best by clearing the path – whether its smaller rocks - --
Or big boulders...

He was behind the scenes, not in the spotlight – supporting his staff and working for them...
When I moved on to my first really complicated management role, I tried to apply some of these lessons learned. But I learned a really valuable lesson from my own failure. So I will tell you that story. Because it continues to drive me personally – and to inform how I mentor others.

I was a middle manager at FIU – head of reference and instruction – about 17 people. That was where I forged my experiences in the libraries role as educational partner. I won’t tell you the long story, but by the time I left that organization at the end of a ten year run, we had a faculty senate approved proposal for embedding information literacy learning outcomes across the curriculum – in every major – starting with articulated outcomes in a FYE, continuing with a second year set of outcomes, continuing with a third year and capstone. This was BEFORE the ACRL info lit standards were developed – in 1998…

In less than 2 years after I left in 2000 to go to Berkeley, the entire program fell apart… Why? It was held together by me – my personality, my relationships, my vision, my management and support of librarians and other staff who contributed… I did not build in the infrastructure needed for the initiative to be sustained by the organization…
It was a difficult lesson for me because I don’t take failure lightly – and while that work led to the work on the standards and influenced my subsequent work on ed reform – building these developmental pathways for embedding outcomes.. My footprints at FIU were washed away...
And I coined the phrase that many hear me say – it’s not enough to be the star – at some point you have to transition to helping others shine – and create infrastructure and organizational culture to sustain..

That experience weighed heavily on me during my time in an even greater leadership role at Berkeley – and I was much more intentional about the strategies I used to create the space and the support by kicking down doors – but then stepping aside while others walked through and took the lead.
I want to talk a bit about **leadership at all levels**. From my first job as a library assistant I have been identified as a “leader” by others in the organization... I took it for granted – after all I went to Yale as one of the first class of women and our welcome speech was all about how we were all leaders in whatever path we chose... so I had that confidence – some might say arrogance - but really it is just an expectation that I will give everything -- my all and be good at it.. Its not the job – it’s the way you approach the challenge and see yourself within the organization – and yeah, it’s a lot about confidence... but its also about picking up responsibility – not waiting for it to be thrust upon you.. I wish I had a nickel for every time I said to someone that I wished someone would pick up an issue and run with it..

... So what are some other behaviors -- Within the library – on campus – within our profession – outside the profession --
Besides taking responsibility for the welfare of the entire library – not just your department...
If you want to distinguish yourself – step up! Volunteer!!

Or as my associate dean Jen Fabbi likes to say – never be afraid to walk to the front of the room.. You know – all those seats that are empty while others huddle at the back
Use your library as a laboratory – experiment – try things – learn from it – and here is a phrase I learned early on about risk taking.

Take mis steps in the right direction..
We are long past the phrase that the only constant IS change – leaders throughout the organization see the opportunities in change and embrace it... and they inspire others through their enthusiasm – and are at the center of shifting the culture to one that sees opportunities in change...
Fifteen years ago I did a presentation at a LOEX meeting about creating relationships at all levels in the organization – I have been doing workshops and talks on the topic since then -- a few weeks ago I did a “Patter with Patty” in my own library about the same topic --- its about a focus on the other – not your agenda – but the other person’s agenda... who are you forging the relationship with – and how can you help them succeed – what motivates them... what keeps your provost awake nights? What are the issues in your campus strategic plan? How do you contribute? Make your list – classroom instructors – what do they care most about? Motivating students.. Academic honesty – managing class size -- class administration (assignments that scale) – finding research grants – getting published – creating their p and t file... colleagues in student life – in distance in – in provost office... what motivates them – what are they working on?

have coffee..invite in to see what you do – send them information that could be useful to their work..

My associate dean Jen Fabbi calls these “strategic hooks”
To have those conversations – and to do more than participate – but LEAD – you need to stay well informed on the education issues that are important or will resonate – talk to your campus colleagues about national initiatives they should know about – general or discipline based.. Eg department chair? trends in accreditation for their field... faculty who demonstrate an interest in teaching – federal grants for teaching in their discipline.. New head of gen ed in the provost office – latest about assessment practices for WASC core competencies...

But you have to stay on top of the issues – read... one of my recent concerns is the trend towards IT spaces that librarians like to go – like Educause -- those in IT – academic computing – distance ed – most faculty are most influenced by their own professional associations than they are by the technology issues..
And when you are out there – representing the library and making connections about what you and your library can and does do to help that agenda -- be sure the library message is clear so that you can be an ambassador when the time is right... for example – one of my messages about the library that relates to our education mission is about collections – we spend $7 million a year to purchase collections – we want to be sure that they are making a difference – my mantra is – we are moving the library from the center of campus to the center of student learning... but there are all kinds of messages – and it’s a constant challenge for the organization to be clear on them... more on that later when we discuss organizational culture..
Get a seat at the table – and when you are there, contribute!! Show what you can do! What librarians can do! And if you don’t have a seat – make your own table!!!! Invite people to a meeting that you want to have...
And this is the absolutely my most important point – it has to do with professional pride in who we are and what we bring.

Embrace your strengths – our campus needs them

--- librarians are organized – structured – we bring order to chaos
--- service is part of our professional DNA (user centered)
--- collaboration is at the core of our organizational values..
--- we are data driven and analytical
--- we are power users of IT

And we are the last of a dying breed on campus – the generalist -- able to see and make connections – at a time where interdisciplinarity, collaborative research and teaching and grantsmanship is valued, as is evidence based decision-making, and user centered teaching … all we tend to lack is confidence…

Just last Friday – someone I don’t know - another library director – asked me what education background I had that allowed me to be successful with general education reform – to be active in AAC& U and WASC

He asked if I had a graduate degree in education –

How many directors of general education, directors of assessment, vice provost for undergraduate education, provosts – have graduate degrees in education??? How
Are we less qualified than our faculty colleagues who come to teaching and higher ed administration with their disciplinary degrees? I argue that we are MORE qualified.

Librarians are obsessed with professional development. We are committed to lifelong learning. We engage in action research – or minimally – assessment for continuous improvement.

All of these characteristics prepare us -- we just need to learn to speak their language and bring the rest of our skills and abilities to bear on the issue-- we need to rethink our roles and develop the professional confidence to realize the expertise that we have and that we can bring. Embrace the strengths that makes us librarians.

They make us special on our campuses
So my final set of thoughts are about leadership from a position of authority – whether it is as a middle manager or senior administrator or even as the dean/director.

Obviously – it is far from the only place you can lead – but there are certain responsibilities for both management and the cultivation of leadership that comes with the position...
First and foremost is the responsibility to listen – to question -- to investigate

As soon as you are in a position of any authority – and especially when you are new to an organization – people start to lobby – to woo – to end run – to bring their issues to you..

The most sage advice I ever received when I was in a new position as a senior administrator was to wait six months before I make any major changes... its advice I pass on to my new managers – wait – listen – talk to everyone – listen some more and ask lots of questions – learn the organization – the strengths and weaknesses of individuals – and when there are conflicting views – investigate – talk to everyone and ask questions – usually reality is in the middle...
Basically be a sponge – soak it up – listen and learn
Anyone ever experience a new person in charge of something who doesn’t pay any attention to what has happened in the past? I remember one institution I entered -- when I got there and after meeting with all the departments I learned that they had spent more than a year investigating a topic and writing a report that then sat for a year with no feedback or action.. And we wonder why there is committee fatigue... I picked it up, dusted it off, and asked the org to give it another look so it would inform future actions

People need a response to the work they do – they need to know that the investment of their time and expertise is going to influence action – it doesn’t mean that every recommendation is accepted – it means that the recommendations will be seriously considered - with an open mind – and when action IS taken, the message back is “we heard you...thank you – your ideas and expertise informed this decision”

What is it about new managers/administrators that makes them think they have to come in and fix everything that is broken – without even finding out if it is..
Another trait of leadership is to own the decision – ever experience those people in an organization who have a wall of teflon around them? Its always someone else who made the decision – quoting someone else – usually in a position of greater authority... those individuals get little respect – up, down or sideways...
Or those that blame others -- it's always someone else's fault... Part of this goes back to self awareness. I often find that the MOST difficult person in the organization is the one who can never even see let alone accept how they might be contributing to something that needs to be adjusted. A relationship - - a project... they are too busy assigning blame..
“We’ve found the people responsible for your bad decisions.”

And worst of all is the leader who does it...
Or the flip of it – who take credit by having their organization carry them...on the backs of their staff – I HATE this image...
One of the lessons I learned along the way is about the difference between those who talk a good talk – but don’t DO anything – vs those who actually make something happen…

I have a bit of a pet peeve about this one –

There are far too many people in our profession who make a career out of writing about what we should be doing – but who have never made it actually happen in an organization.. I call them professional professionals

Some are very successful and well known in our field – they publish a lot – travel a lot – are invited to speak everywhere – may even hold a leadership position within a professional organization.. They often have a lot to say… but when I hire someone, I want to see if they can actually get it done -- that they are actually able to create the organization where people are supported to make it happen..

This is true for all levels of managers.. Just because someone writes about management or leadership doesn’t mean they live it..
I find that self awareness activities keep me honest – remind me when I might be drifting
I also like to say that you learn most from those who disagree with you – so creating that space for civil discourse is really important -- and creating that kind of organization is not always easy to do..
"We asked the employees for more feedback, but after reprimanding those who spoke up, none was forthcoming."
One of the most fundamental requirements of leaders is managing change -- One basic tenet of change management is to be sure you are not just changing for the sake of change – for the latest trend - for reputation or sound bite - the leader has data that frames the change in terms of improvement and communicates that back out in the message related to the change.
And part of managing change is creating critical mass – an environment that others want to be part of. Strategically I think it happens two ways – through new hires, and through more organic culture shift where others want to be part of the environment. Most often because they begin to see the benefit to themselves and to the organization (because of the way that data is framed...
More than 20 years ago I wrote an article titled “leadership development and organizational maturity” in which I discussed the literature of organization develop, and suggested some ways to cultivate and nurture leadership in an organization... I talked about committee structures and how they are superimposed on a traditionally hierarchical organization chart – how they provide leadership opportunities..

Here it is 20 years later and I still need to constantly pay attention to what some in the literature call “managing the white spaces” on an org chart... regardless of the hierarchy – everything we do – at almost any level of the organization – has stakeholders across the library ... and managing how that communication and decision-making takes place is a constant challenge for everyone –not just middle and senior managers – but everyone in the organization because despite departmental walls – they are or should be porous as we work across the organization to do our jobs..

And the issue I struggle with the most right now is the delegation and organizational acceptance of authority to committees..
So of all the leadership challenges I now face – at the place I am in my own organization – there are two I want to underscore --

the first is my responsibility for organizational culture – What is organizational culture? Its how we do things? How we define or describe ourselves – our vision – our values - our practices.. Its how we behave as an organization – how we talk about ourselves... which the literature shows is usually heavily influenced by its leader – as a matter of fact, strong leaders at the top, positive or negative, influence the strength of the culture – and weak leaders result in the develop of sub cultures.. Sometimes in conflict with each other..
And the second most important responsibility is seeing the big picture – the pattern -- and realize how it is assembled...
How are the pieces put together and how to break it down into its components – when I found this image of pieces of glass that make the kaleidoscope image – I remembered that I use this analogy more than 15 years ago in a keynote of a RUSA meeting called “reference librarian as pattern maker” -- it's no surprise, given my own style, that I value the ability to see patterns..
By now you have figured out, as I have while working on this, that I have a lot to say about leadership - although the aha moment I had is how little my views on leadership have changed over the years -- I could go on– but I will leave some for others to say... so I will close with the place I began – an image from an Alvin Ailey performance – and if I can show this clip I will as it mirrors my view of a strong organization..

Play clip

Individual talent – sometimes separate – sometimes together – fluidly moving in and out to form one group than another – obviously in sync – but sometimes less obviously... with plenty of space for individuality and unique talent – and an shared commitment to excellence and the pattern that they make together.. Moving independently as part of the whole.