

## **The Mentor: Leadership in Librarianship**

**Tracy Bicknell-Holmes:** Dean, Albertsons Library, Boise State University, ID

**Keywords:** librarianship, career development, mentoring, leadership

**Citation:** Bicknell-Holmes, T. (2018). The mentor: Leadership in librarianship. *PNLA Quarterly*, 82 (2).

*Editor's note: The Mentor column is a place for advice, storytelling, introspection, and professional growth.*

I have to admit I was not enthusiastic about the theme for this issue of the PNLA Quarterly. We've been talking about leadership in libraries for 30 years. What more could I contribute? This frame of mind is what led me to the focus of my column. I will give examples where opportunities to demonstrate leadership were not taken, and potential alternatives that might be used in situations like these.

### **Unconscious Elitism**


I once had a librarian tell me that they didn't get a graduate degree to "turn on lights". On the day of this conversation, all of the staff who would normally open the building were either sick or running late. This librarian walked into the dark building an hour after opening, passed numerous light switches along the way to their office, noticed the frantic staff, and did nothing to help even though nothing urgent was on their agenda.

Whether someone has a degree or not, most everyone is part of a team. Leadership is demonstrated by contributing to the work of the team, and stepping up when needed. This often means contributing beyond the confines of your specific duties, and sometimes taking on tasks that are typically done by a staff person in another rank.

Outright elitism is rare. However, similar issues come up as the nature of our work changes and tasks that were once performed by librarians shift down the ranks. Librarians may feel that questions received on the reference desk are too easy. Why not shift the work of answering them to the staff? Staff may feel they're being asked to do work above their pay scale without additional compensation. Both feelings are valid. Both sides can demonstrate leadership by 1) not rushing to judge the other, 2) working to understand and respect the other's viewpoint, and 3) focusing on the larger goal - how do we as a team get the work done while making sure the concerns of both sides are addressed?

### **Follow Up Conversations**

Although an individual conversation may be over, the opportunity for dialog rarely is. This is particularly true for individuals who must work together long term and can influence each other's career success for better or worse. I once consulted with an individual who was hired on the spot by a library director and placed in a unit without consultation with the unit supervisor. This action set up an awkward triangle between the individual, their supervisor, and the library director. The supervisor should have immediately cleared the air with the individual and discussed how to move forward. When the



individual found out three months later how they'd come to be hired they decided that it was too late to do anything about it. It's never too late! The individual could have talked to the supervisor about what had happened and how the two of them could move forward together. Yes, these conversations might have been excruciating but well worth the time. In the end, all three individuals were hurt by what happened due in part to the decision each made to avoid talking about it.

Any time a conversation is bothering you, think about why and what to do about it. Find a coach or advisor who can talk through it with you. What was it that bothered you? How might you approach a follow up conversation with them? If it feels risky, perhaps you might ask another individual to go with you. Practice with small issues to build your confidence. Consider practicing on family and friends before jumping in at work.

### **Everyone Knows but that Person**

Think about your colleagues or people you know. Can you think of a person so negative that they are labeled “toxic” and people avoid them? Or one so talkative that people avoid them because the conversation never ends? Over the years I've been struck by how often I've encountered a situation where people were complaining about a colleague's difficult behavior, yet no one was talking to the subject of the complaints or the individual's supervisor.

We've been taught not to tattle or tell on each other, but this is a disservice to individuals with problematic behavior. Sometimes assumptions are made that the individual has been told, but perhaps they didn't get the message in a way that helped them understand. Offering constructive criticism and taking responsibility for sharing our experiences in ways that can help others improve their performance is a leadership skill that can be used at any level. If someone's behavior is negatively affecting others, it may be time for a “come to Jesus” meeting, where the individual is explicitly told about the behavior, its impact on others, and the coaching to improve begins.

So, do any of these situations sound familiar? Do the suggested alternatives sound like things you could do as a leader? Watch for opportunities, even small ones, and be courageous.