

## PNLA Leads: An Attendee's Perspective

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**Keywords:** leadership, library leadership, leadership training

**Citation:** Vélez, V. (2018). PNLA Leads: An attendee's perspective. *PNLA Quarterly*, 82(2).

In the crisp and rainy final week of October 2015, I attended PNLA Leads at a quirky little hotel on the beautiful Washington coast, and can unequivocally claim it as one of the most rewarding experiences of my professional life. It was challenging and exhausting, but worth every minute of frustration and lost sleep. As part of my leadership journey, the Leads institute stands at a crossroads of my previous experiences and my future endeavors; I had just finished my MLIS program in the spring of that year and taken on new roles at work, but hadn't yet given much thought to what kind of leader I wanted to become, if any. The Leads institute broadened my understanding of what a leader could be and provided me with a valuable toolbox of ideas and skills for enhancing my personal and professional growth.

Although Becky Schreiber and John Shannon are no longer facilitating, I was lucky enough to attend their last year while receiving the added benefit of partial facilitation from experienced PNLA professionals. Becky and John kept us on track and motivated, and not always gently! I appreciated that, while always respectful, they didn't take no for an answer or allow excuses. They knew we were there to learn, and they made sure that we did. In that one blustery week, we covered personal leadership styles, motivation cycles and group dynamics, environmental assessments, personal and professional visioning, self-confidence and resilience building, transition cycles, relationship building, and self-evaluation and self-empowerment. On top of all that, we were encouraged to write "morning pages" (from Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*) and use a reflection journal. In the evenings, after dinner, we all attended "Mentor Moments," fireside chats led by different PNLA leaders, who used these times to share excerpts of their personal journeys with us and answer audience questions. The intimacy of these listening moments provided a welcome respite from the intensity of the day's work and allowed us insights into the leadership stories of respected colleagues.

In addition to increasing our connections with our mentors, these informal storytelling sessions helped us understand that achievement and growth do not necessarily occur along a straight line from point A to point B; rather, setbacks and surprises along the way might force unwanted detours. Through personal revelations, we understood how our responses to these detours determine the level of our subsequent success or failure, and the importance of retaining a growth mindset with an attitude of personal responsibility and agency, instead of a fixed mindset of victimization with an inability to learn or grow.

One of the most valuable aspects of the institute was this forced intimacy; as a guarded person by nature, it's not easy for me to open up and express my fears or opinions, but the packed schedule and fast pace of the various activities didn't leave much room for shyness –if you didn't participate, you let your group down. Most of us librarians will understand this sense of duty, at least, even if we shudder at the thought of expressing our innermost desires with total strangers. Serendipitously, I had just finished Amanda Palmer's *The Art of Asking*, whose similarity with Brené Brown's *The Gifts of Imperfection* struck me as slightly suspicious, until I read Brown's foreword to Palmer's memoir and realized that it was simply kismet that these two books approached the same topic – vulnerability – from

such different backgrounds (one academic, the other experiential). In any case, I firmly believe that reading these two books shortly before attending the Leads institute enhanced my experience there by making me more receptive to the lessons imparted by our mentors and facilitators, and I highly recommend both to anybody interested in increasing their creativity, compassion, and courage.

Something else the institute taught me was that there is no substitute for experience. You can read all you want, but the only way to become truly comfortable speaking from your authentic voice is by practicing doing so, in real life, with real people. Although PNLA Leads felt more exploratory (and safer) than most real-life situations, it was a great testing ground to flex emotional or intellectual muscles you might not use every day, such as empathy, compassion, active listening, improvisation, discomfort, and enthusiasm. The Leads facilitators recognize that the institute can feel like a bubble, with the danger of returning to your “normal life” and being too busy putting out fires to consciously apply any of the principles or strategies learned during the week. Accordingly, they provide ideas for re-entry which include developing a “30 second commercial” (i.e. elevator pitch) describing the lessons learned at Leads, as well as a list of commitments to be developed by the attendee.

I could go on about the various activities and networking opportunities at PNLA Leads, but it’s probably best to experience it yourself. If you ever get the opportunity to attend, here is my advice on how to make the most of it:

Do the homework. Even if you don’t believe in Enneagram or other personality typing, it’s worthwhile going through the quiz to practice self-assessment and self-reflection.


Do the work while you’re there! Although it can get exhausting, morning pages and journaling help provide you with valuable insights and set you up for the day with a focused and receptive mindset.

Sleep, rest, get outside; whatever recharges you. Try to get enough shuteye, but also make sure to take some reflective time by yourself to allow new connections to trickle through your consciousness as you work through the concepts presented during the day’s activities.

Try not to bring your regular work with you. John and Becky told us we wouldn’t have time for it, and they were right. While you probably can’t avoid checking your email and connecting with family or coworkers, you’ll get the most value from Leads if you are able to focus fully on it instead of splitting your attention.

And finally - take the personal action plan seriously! If there is one thing I regret about Leads, it’s that I let my momentum from it die down in the wake of my regular work demands. I also regret not keeping in better touch with the friends I made at the institute. I met some incredible people there, and in this age of interconnectedness, there’s no excuse for not reaching out, even just to check in. That’s my goal for this week.

In a nutshell, PNLA Leads is worth it, and if you get the chance to attend, you should! If you can’t attend, or you already have, consider supporting the institute through donations to allow others in our



profession access to this wonderful resource.

### Bibliography

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