

## **You're a Library Director, Now What?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper briefly examines three areas that individuals new to library leadership should focus on during their first year as a new library director: creating relationships, understanding financials, and identifying a leadership style. While this paper is written with the public library administrator in mind, the areas and ideas showcased are easily transferrable to academic, government, and special library administrators.

The intent of this paper is to increase awareness and understanding of these three important topics:


1. Creating relationships and listening for understanding;
2. The financials of your organization;
3. Identifying personal strengths and weaknesses, expectations, and leadership style.

### **Introduction**

Leadership within a public library is a constantly changing dynamic. One of the reasons is that public libraries are constantly changing—offering new services, integrating new technologies, and hiring more diverse expertise, to name a few examples. To be an effective leader, one must be willing to adapt to the multitude of changes one faces as the head of an organization. This paper focuses on three areas—creating relationships, financial understanding, and leadership style—that professionals new to library leadership should contemplate as they take on their new roles. Of course, there are numerous other areas of library administration to explore and become acquainted with over the course of the onboarding process. The ideas discussed in this paper were chosen as they relate to all forms of libraries: public, academic, government, special, rural, urban, those with or without branches; and of all levels of number of employees and budget allocations. For the purpose of this paper, the terms leader and leadership are interchangeable with the terms library director and library administrator.

### **Congratulations!**

Welcome to library leadership! Perhaps this is your first foray into library administration. Perhaps you have experience being a department head, branch manager, or other type of management within a library. Perhaps you have experience already in library administration and are looking for a different perspective or insight to foster more personal growth. Whatever the case, I am glad that you are taking the time to read the ideas shared in this article. Leadership is a tricky endeavor. It takes time to cultivate and hone one's leadership skills. It takes time to learn what works for you and what does not work for you. While it may seem that leadership is a lonely place, it does not need to be this way. Some of the best leaders I have had the privilege to follow were the ones that realized early on that while the leader of an organization may be an island, the staff members and community partners surrounding this leader



form a powerful and much needed archipelago.

Before embarking on the three main ideas briefly discussed in this article, I want to share some other aspects of leadership that I have found to be extremely beneficial in my own leadership journey. Not all of these experiences will be useful to you. But I think many of them will. The first one is humility. Ego has a tendency to make leadership corrosive. Check your ego. Just because you sit in the corner office, make the most money, or have the best perks regarding your position within an organization, you do not necessarily know all the answers, have the best solutions to a problem, or even fully understand all that happens within your organization. Accept that as a leader you need to humble yourself before your staff, the public, and stakeholders by knowing when to ask questions, when to remain silent, when to just listen, or when to say three of the most powerful words in the human language: I. Don't. Know. If you are able to do this, you are well on your way to developing trust with your staff, the public, and your stakeholders.

The second aspect I wish to share is the concept of being part of a team. As the leader of your organization, it may be easier to lead from afar. It is comfortable to watch from a safe distance as your staff performs your directives. Sometimes this is needed. That being said, more often than not, your incorporation and participation within the team is more advantageous to you, your staff, and the overall success of your organization. Make the effort to be part of the team. This does not mean that you micro-manage every aspect of the work going on within the organization. What this means is that you have taken the time to engage with the multitude of projects, services, or resources your organization offers or is currently developing. Aim to be conversational about these many offerings. Again, you do not need to be an expert, but you should not be a deer in the headlights about a topic if approached by the public or your stakeholders about what your library offers.

The third thing I want to share is the importance of patience. Patience is a gift. Unfortunately, patience is sometimes dressed in an unflattering outfit disguised as indecisiveness. As a leader, strive to know the difference between being patient and being indecisive. Being patient means gathering all of the information you need to make a well-informed decision. This may come in the form of research, public hearings, or staff input, to name a few. Being indecisive means having the information and not committing to an actionable plan. If you are a new leader, you may fear making the wrong decision. While this is a legitimate fear, I have bad news. You will make a decision that will not be popular. Making unpopular decisions is part of leadership. The goal of any leader is to be able to provide sound evidence to support why a decision was made.

And, when you are able to provide evidence as to why a decision was made, this allows the fourth thing I want to share: ownership. As a leader, own your job. This means taking full responsibility and accountability as the leader of your organization. Bottom line: be the type of leader that you would like to follow. Own your mistakes. Share the successes. Be a consummate cheerleader for your staff and your organization. Set the standard for excellence, but at the same time don't pass the buck for failure. And, remember, failure is not the ghastly monster most commonly projected within one's mind.

Finally, do everything in your power to navigate around the pitfall of what I deem to be the most egregious error of leadership: You do not need to be better than your predecessor. That is not your goal.

While the reason that you are in your leadership position may have something to do with the actions of your predecessor, your goal is to use your skills to enhance your organization, to make it better through your skills of leadership. In all likelihood, you have never been in competition with your predecessor. Don't start now. Be you. Set your own leadership goals. Form relationships. Strive to gain an understanding of your organization. And, take a breath. Leadership is extraordinarily fun, even if difficult.


### **Listening for Understanding and Creating Relationships**

You have moved into your new office. You have business cards that proclaim your new title. You have all these ideas yearning to escape your brain. You are eager to start doing. *Now what?* Simply put: Hit the pause button. The inclination to start doing and making changes seems to be the right path. However, in most cases, it is not. There will be a time for doing, just not yet. Right now is a time for listening. So before you set in to action your plan to revolutionize your organization, give yourself some time to better understand your organization. Plan for the first six months (a year is better, if you have the flexibility) to begin an information gathering and listening tour. Even if you were promoted from within your organization to the position you now hold, you need to be able to adjust to this new perspective. The view from leadership is vastly different from almost all of the other positions within your organization. Certainly make changes, if needed. But try not to make any sweeping changes until you have had a chance to become, to the best of your ability, informed about the areas that need to change.

During this information gathering and listening tour, acquaint yourself with the history of your organization. In all likelihood, you are not the first person to have this office or make decisions for your organization. During this time, try to understand the rationale behind your predecessor's actions and decisions. You will probably find an area or two that will mark a beginning for your own changes. You will also probably find that some areas that you want to change cannot be changed. Regardless, you are acquiring historical and institutional knowledge of your organization that will be extremely useful to you as you grow as a leader. In other words, honor the future of your organization by understanding your organization's past.

Next, while you are gaining a historical understanding of your organization, strive to understand your organization through internal and external cultural lenses. Before attaining your current level of leadership, you may have not been aware of the external cultural relationships your current organization currently has, or the ones that were once strong but have now become weak. This is a time for reaching out to these partners to better understand how your organization and their organization can best complement each other. This is also a chance to share your vision of the future of your organization with potential stakeholders. Internally, take the time to understand the environmental culture of your organization as to how it works, its organizational structure, and the overall temperament and health of the staff. Many new leaders are so eager to begin making changes that they fall victim to not fully understanding what these changes could mean to the overall health and mindset of the staff. If done properly, acquiring the internal and external culture understandings may provide insight to how you want to make changes, the strategies you will employ, and potential staff members who may help in this process.

As you get a better historical and cultural understanding of your organization, it is also crucial to un-



derstand the political battlefield of leadership. I wish I could say that politics will be nominal in your new role. That is most likely not the case. Every new leader should strive to get a basic understanding of the political atmosphere of not only the organization they are leading, but also a reading of the political environment of the community their organization serves. It is important to remain apolitical as an organization. But politics does play a role in all organizations. Sometimes just having a cursory understanding of prior political battles of your predecessors allows for understanding of how not to approach an issue. Understanding the politics of an organization will also help with understanding how an organization is financed, the services it has previously provided, and dynamics and relationships with the staff, the public, or even stakeholders.

Each of these areas—historical, cultural, and political—take time to navigate and explore. But bypassing this first step is a sure way to experience (and find!) problems that with a bit of foresight could have been avoided until a more solid foundation of understanding had been achieved. Gathering information in these areas also helps you better understand the areas of strengths and weaknesses in your own leadership style. By exploring each of these areas you have proactively begun the process of developing relationships. And it is through relationships that the overall success of your organization depends.

As a leader you provide the vision for your organization. But this vision cannot come to fruition without staff believing in the vision. This time of information gathering and listening is also a time to begin creating relationships with your staff. As their new leader, you have to acknowledge that some of them may have wanted someone else hired instead of you. This can be a hard pill to swallow. Check your ego. Instead of ruminating that they wanted someone else in your office, take the time to get to know them. If possible, spend 20-30 minutes with each staff member over the course of a few weeks or months. Learn how they best succeed under a leader. This is an arduous task. It takes time. But leadership is not a one-size-fits-all approach. A good leader can get everyone going in the same direction; a great leader will understand how each of their team members moves in order to go in that one direction. Investment in your staff is one of the best investments you can make for your future as their leader. This is also a time when you can express your expectations of them. And, if you are bold, you can ask them what they expect from you. It is difficult enough being a leader, but it is even more difficult to be a leader not knowing what expectations your staff has for you and your role within leadership. And should you have this conversation with your staff, be prepared to not receive feedback immediately. For some of the staff, this request for feedback may come as a surprise. It is not often that a leader will willingly make themselves vulnerable in order to grow.

Once you have begun the process of creating relationships with your staff, extend this relationship building to the other entities that are striving to make your organization successful. For example, reach out to Library Board members, Foundation members, and Friends of the Library Board members. Ask them to help you gain a better understanding of your organization. Create an open avenue of trust and discourse. As with your staff, share your expectations of each entity while also asking for their expectations for you as a leader. Establishing relationships with these entities also provides the opportunity to meet other leaders within the community. The people on each of the boards mentioned above are on these boards for a reason. They are most likely connected and influential within their sphere of influence. Use their knowledge to share your vision, grow your organization, and to gain access to the com-

munity you serve. Obviously, this will take time. And, for some, it is a giant step out of a comfort zone. But libraries are changing. And change comes through collaboration.


## **Budget and Financials**

The organization's budget is more than just its lifeblood. The organization's budget is also the main tool that leadership uses to allocate, strategize, and organize new opportunities for services, resources, and potential partnerships. Understanding the organization's budget is a process. Start by understanding the funding mechanisms. If your library gets funding from a city or county, understand the mills ratio and allocations. Acquire information about the history of the budget. When was the last time the budget experienced growth? When was the last time the budget was cut? Why was the budget cut? This knowledge will help with the yearly budget planning process. Additionally, if your organization has a Foundation or a Friends of the Library group that contributes a yearly allotment, how much is this? How have these monies been used? If there are other outside revenue streams, what are they? How are these monies used? You have to become conversant about your organization's budget in a way that will enable you to speak with authority on the simplest of inquiries or the hardest questions posed by a governing body. And as with creating relationships, this takes time. Ask for help. Ultimately, you will be the one responsible to answer for and oversee your organization's wealth and monetary resources.

With this information, use what you have learned before the yearly budget process. In some organizations, the Library Board will set the budget. In other organizations, the budget is determined by city officials. In some cases, it may be a combination of the two or even have a third option. Regardless of the funding authority, you want to be able to understand why monies were allocated in the manner in which they were. Oftentimes, budgets are stressful because they are not fully understood. Save yourself worry and a late night outing to the pharmacy for Maalox by doing your homework about the financials of your organization.

But budgets demand honesty. Conjuring money from nothing is not an option. This means that when times of trouble do approach, the best defense is a well-informed offense. Within the budget, begin the process of identifying areas where cuts or reallocations can be made. Start with the external databases used in your organization. What are cost per usage statistics? How long has the library been paying the current price for the resource? Can the price be negotiated? Are there different options for the resources? Can the resource be acquired through a consortium or other outside partnership? If using the databases is not optional, study the collection development budget to see if cuts or reallocations can be made in this area. Again, statistical analysis of usage in each area of a library's collection could provide a source of savings. I do not recommend cutting personnel or services to save money.

Finally, unforeseen expenditures will happen. But even unforeseen expenditures can be predicted and planned for. Technology will always need to be upgraded. Plan for it. Library vehicles will need to be replaced or repaired. Plan for it. The facility itself, even if new, will have costs associated with it. Plan for it. If you are completely new to this position of leadership, it is time to become proactive in financial planning for your organization. Make sure that there is a schedule for replacing technology, equipment, library vehicles, or even personnel. This may take a year or two to fully design and implement,



but it is worth it. And if you are an old hand at leadership, ensure that there are plans in place so that once you leave your post your successor will not have to worry about the financial quagmires.

## **Leadership Style**

Leadership style should never be so set that it cannot change. The best leaders are versatile in their leadership abilities. During your information gathering and listening tour it is also important that you take the time to reflect upon yourself as a leader. Once promoted to leadership it is easy to project in your mind how you will be as a leader. Perhaps you already have a notion of what type of leader you want to be within your organization. This is not necessarily a bad thing to imagine or contemplate. However, caution ought to be applied to this type of thinking. For it is only when a person has been in a leadership role for some time that they are made fully aware of their leadership abilities and also what type of leader is needed for the organization. Again, leadership skills take time to fully realize. Every day should provide an opportunity for growth. In the first six months (or a year!) take the time to fully understand your strengths and weaknesses. We all have different strengths. And we all have different weaknesses. Perhaps your strengths can help camouflage some of your weaknesses. This is a good strategy at first. But sooner or later, your weaknesses will have to be addressed. And if you have begun the process of cultivating relationships with your staff, the public, other library entities (FOL, Board, Foundation), and external stakeholders, you already have an army to help you overcome your weaknesses.

The most successful leaders are the ones who are willing to change in order to meet the demands of their organization. Failure in leadership oftentimes happens because those in leadership positions are too stubborn to admit that the needed change for the organization needs to start with them. This may be as simple as being more inclusive in your communication. Or it may be as difficult as undertaking the necessary steps to rearrange administration, removing personnel, or adding or relinquishing responsibilities at the management level. Unfortunately, there is not a magical elixir one can drink to become the best leader for their organization. Time, preparation and a proactive mindset are your allies.

And just like the transition your staff is experiencing under the guidance of new leadership, you, too, are experiencing a transition. Give yourself the flexibility to learn from others as you become acclimated to your new role. If possible, find a mentor. Study different leadership styles and strategies. Speak with other library administrators. Join a professional association to gain insights to leadership. You know that you will have things to learn. But there are many things you are still unaware of that you will be expected to know. Much like everything else during your initial months on the job, this, too, will take time. The key is to make this time productive for you, your staff, your stakeholders, your governing body, and your partners.

## **Conclusion**

The three areas covered in this paper—creating relationships, understanding financials, and developing one's leadership style—are only the basics of what to contemplate when becoming a new library administrator. It takes time to find success in leadership. And while you will assuredly fail at some point, you will also experience great success. Appreciate this balance. Take the time to gain a better under-

standing of your organization, your role within your organization, and the leadership needs of your staff. Develop relationships with your staff, the public, special interest groups, partners, and all other stakeholders. Strive to be fluent in all aspects of the financials of your organization. And be flexible. Leadership is difficult, to be sure. But a successful leader can be transformative. Endeavor to become the type of leader you would want to follow within an environment in which you would like to work.