A Leadership Primer for New Librarians

# A Leadership Primer for New Librarians: Tools for helping today's early-career librarians to become tomorrow's library leaders

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# About the authors

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**Dawn Lowe-Wincentsen** is currently the Portland operations librarian for the Oregon Institute of Technology. She and Suzanne met when she worked at the Florida State University Libraries as assessment and staff development coordinator. Dawn earned her master's in library and information science from Louisiana State University in 2003. She received her BA in creative writing from Linfield College in 2000. When not at the library, Dawn is cooking and crafting. She is married to Jesse Lowe.

The authors may be contacted via the publisher.

# Acknowledgements

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Lastly, we would like to thank all of the contributors for sharing their own experiences with us, and with the readers.

# List of acronyms

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| ALA | American Library Association |
| ALIA | Australian Library and Information Association |
| ARL | Association of Research Libraries |
| CUNY | City University of New York |
| CV | curriculum vitae |
| EQ | emotional intelligence quotient |
| IRB | Institutional Review Board |
| LACUNY | Library Association of the City University of New York |
| LIS | library and information sciences |
| MPLA | Mountain Plains Library Association |
| NMRT | ALA New Members Round Table |
| OPAC | online public access catalog |
| SLA | Special Libraries Association |

# About this book

Every book its reader. (S.R. Ranganathan)

Ten reasons you want to read this book.
1. You are curious.

2. You are a new librarian or are about to become one.

3. You are in a position that answers to someone.

4. You are a supervisor.

5. You are interested in learning how to influence others effectively.

6. You see change happening and have to deal with it.

7. You want to be a leader.

8. You do not want to be a leader.

9. The word 'follower' makes you want to baaaa.

10. You are a librarian, and according to myth must read every book.

This book is not just about our experiences, or about our take on library leadership, or even our research on leadership. This book is about what librarians in the field want from a library leader and how we have become leaders ourselves. We are both early-career librarians who want to share our experiences and the experiences of other early-career librarians. After entering the profession we realized

that all the tools required for career success were not acquired in library school.

In addition to sharing our perspectives and experiences, we created a survey hoping to gain insight into the way early-career librarians define leadership. The survey focused on how librarians and other information professionals view leadership and leadership roles. We sent invitations to participate in the study to two listservs that target early-career librarians, Newlib-L and NMRT-L, which is the listserv for the American Library Association's New Members Round Table. The surveys targeted professionals with less than ten years of experience. The participants were asked both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. There were 58 respondents. At the end of the survey, participants had the option to take part in a short telephone interview. The telephone volunteers were asked five additional open-ended questions. Eight people participated in the telephone interviews, which lasted from 30 minutes to one hour. The findings from both the surveys and the interviews are linked throughout the book, but no names or identities are provided. As the research involved human subjects, we requested and received approval through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Florida State University.

The final method of gaining insight into the experiences and views of early-career librarians was through a call for contributions to this book. We requested that interested contributing authors write abstracts on their experiences in leadership roles, including advice from the field. We received an overwhelming number of responses. Though there was great variety in submissions, we chose those contributions that were most appropriate for the chapters. The selected submissions are at the end of each relevant chapter. We would like to take this opportunity to extend gratitude to all who shared their stories, experiences and advice with us,

and with you. We have done as little editing as possible to the contributions so that they remain in the authors' own words.

At the end of each chapter are exercises that correspond with the content of the chapter. These are activities you can choose to do, or not. They can help you to develop skills discussed in the chapter, and are activities that you may revisit at a later time.

## The background story

Every person finds a different means of developing their leadership and followership skills. It is our goal that this work can be used as a roadmap for both persons still in graduate school and early-career librarians. The information in the book is gathered from a variety of sources in addition to traditional research methods. This is a compilation of insight and experiences. So who are we and how did we get here?

In 2003 Dawn received her master's in library and information science from Louisiana State University, where she also worked as a staff member in the main library's Reference Department. Upon graduation she became the statistics and assessment librarian at Florida State University. Dawn evolved with this position into the library's staff development coordinator, and eventually moved into the role of department head and assumed the title of undergraduate information services librarian. Dawn is currently the Portland operations librarian for the Oregon Institute of Technology.

Suzanne received her master's of library and information studies degree from the University of Oklahoma in 2005. While in graduate school she worked in the Interlibrary Loan Department. Upon graduation, Suzanne accepted a

position at Florida State University as a reference and instruction librarian. After one year, Suzanne was promoted to department head and became the undergraduate programs librarian. She became interested in followership after reading the book *The Courageous Follower* by Ira Chaleff (2003).

In 2006 Suzanne approached Dawn about submitting a proposal on leadership and followership to the Australian Library and Information Association's (ALIA) New Librarian Symposium. They presented and published 'Following to the top and leading from the bottom', which became the impetus for this work. Leadership and followership are hot topics in the face of change in the library profession.

Since authoring the ALIA paper in 2006, we have both become managers and leaders in our institutions. We hope that our experiences and the experiences of others, the research and other information in this book will help you to develop your own roadmap to followership and effective leadership. As you will see from the stories throughout the book, this joint venture brings together two different writing styles. Because of these different styles, we decided the best way to integrate our work would be to write chapters individually and then combine them in the complete book. Based on this, Suzanne authored Chapters 2, 4 and 6 and Dawn authored Chapters 3, 5 and 7. We also worked together to develop our collective writing style.

We work off each other's strengths and help each other grow in our weaknesses. It is important to note that when taking personality and leadership tests, we discovered that we are complete opposites, and this is one reason why we work well together. Each person must develop their own style, and then find common ground with the people and professionals around them. This is where leadership begins.

# The grey matter

There is much literature on the greying of the library profession. At presentations, during conferences, webcasts and in reading articles, we hear about the mass exodus of library leaders who will be retiring in the next couple of years. When Dawn was in college, she looked up librarianship as a profession because vocational testing told her that was what she should be. The career counselor told her that within ten years scores of librarians would be retiring. That was over ten years ago. And although we have seen librarians retire, we are not sure that the rate is any higher than in other professions – but nor do we know that it isn't.

The flip side of the retirement coin is that many new professionals have been lured into the profession under the guise that there would be a vast number of positions that need filling. There is often chatter on listservs aimed at this demographic, and about the difficulty in finding a first job. A recent discussion on NMRT-L shared experiences about when and how to find a second professional job (Webb, 2008). Again, there was chat about the difficulty in finding a first position, but there was also chatter about the difficulty in making a lateral move into a second position.

Why does the literature both call for new librarians to enter the field and claim that it is difficult to find a entry-level position? We have a few theories. First, people are retiring and this leaves gaps, but usually in positions that require experience. Secondly, some libraries choose not to fill these gaps at all. Thirdly, there is yet another body of literature on professional positions moving to non-professional status. There are any number of changes happening, none of which leads to entry-level positions becoming available.

The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) conducts a salary survey of its members each year. The 2007–2008 data on rank in library (i.e. university librarian, associate university librarian, etc.) show that the upper ranks are the most densely populated (Association of Research Libraries, 2008). To move up in rank one usually needs to have more than a specified number of years in the profession, have been active in the profession and have published, plus a number of other factors that vary by institution. These data suggest that there are more people with more experience than those with less. Every five years the ARL conducts a more detailed salary survey, including the number of years' experience. The 2005–2006 data from this more detailed survey show librarians with four to seven years' experience make up 15 per cent of the profession (Kyrillidou and Young, 2006). Forty-one per cent, nearly half the population, fall in the categories with over 20 years' experience. These data do not suggest mass retirements in the field overall. Another table in the same report gives average number of years' experience based on position. The average experience for an ARL member library director is 31.3 years, associate directors 25 years, assistant directors 23.7 years and branch heads 22.1 years. The same table shows that librarians in positions lower than department head have an average of 14.9 years' experience. Assuming that librarians will retire with 30–35 years' experience, these data suggest the retirements that do happen will be in the upper strata of the profession, leaving a leadership gap.

The data and the literature conflict. Ten years ago there was suggestion of an imminent need for new library professionals. However, the profession has changed, as have the professionals. As a result there will be gaps, particularly in areas requiring leadership skills. It is up to new librarians

to develop the future of the profession and to decide how that leadership occurs.

# Change management

This is where this book steps in. Libraries are changing. Libraries around the world are changing. As librarians, we often like to think of ourselves as the forerunners of change. However, as professionals we are often behind the curve of change. For example, consider the transition from the card catalog to the online catalog. When Dawn was in secondary school in the early 1990s, she worked in the school library. During this time, it began moving to an online catalog. Though such a move made it easier for the students to find books, the head librarian was quite upset by the change. It is not uncommon that people are upset by change, but to grow as a profession we must move forward and embrace change.

Change management is not a new prospect; it is just one that gets revisited in waves. Those waves often correlate to new generations entering the workforce or specific professions. That is to say, each generation does things in a new way. Where Dawn's mother fries her potatoes in canola oil, Dawn fries them in olive oil, and her grandmother fried them in butter and her mother fried them in lard. We are all doing the same thing, but we are just going about it in a different way. Because each of us believes our way is best, we attempt to push that change on to the previous generation. Often this push is met with resistance. Now imagine that same scenario every time a new librarian joins your institution. Person X follows one procedure. Person Y joins the library and introduces a different procedure. While both methods may achieve a desired goal, the differing methods

of implementation will result in a domino effect in which others will need to adapt.

Let's take this a step further. Your job is cataloging books. You are fresh out of school and you know of new software that makes this task more efficient. You talk to your supervisor and implement use of this new tool. You are happy with the way things are going, then one of your co-workers comes over and begins to complain. The problem is that your efficiency levels have risen because of this new software, and now your supervisor is making them use it as well. Everyone must change, and they now resent you as change implementer. Next this will cause change in another department, and they in turn will resent the change agent. This can create a butterfly effect in the workplace. The phrase, coined by former Massachusetts Institute of Technology Professor Edward Lorenz, means one small change can have large and widespread consequences.

Don't avoid change because this scenario frightens you. Find out who the change is going to affect, what processes it will affect, and talk to those involved. Understanding other perspectives is the first step towards success in any change. Understanding how people react to change will help ease the change. Understanding that change is happening will help ease it, and will stop your butterfly wings causing a distant storm. And don't be afraid to change and grow yourself along the way.

We have to adapt to serve our patrons better and to fit better into our changing environments. Professionals need to develop new skills to grow; they need to acquire different skills than professionals who came before them. As new professionals change, more experienced professionals need to change too. It is a two-way street.

In a poster session for the Association of College and Research Libraries and Library Administration

Management Association Virtual Institute, Deborah Hicks (2008) shared case studies among Canadian librarians about change in libraries. One librarian in her study summed up libraries as reactive to change: not the leaders of the pack, yet not at the end of the line. Being more effective change leaders and being willing to take that risk will change this perception. We can be the forerunners of change.

# Our hope

We hope this book will be a roadmap of where new and more experienced professionals can meet. Where does leadership begin, and what is a follower's role? How can we develop as both followers and leaders, and what is a follower anyway? We hope to remove the negative connotations from the term 'follower'. We hope to empower professionals, new and experienced, to find their leadership potential. We hope to provide insight that is different from what you have read before, and to bridge the gap between followership and leadership. We hope that you will enjoy this book.

# Sound off! What the Army taught me about leadership in libraries: Lisa Forrest

*Lisa Forrest, MLS, is senior assistant librarian for SUNY College at Buffalo.*

Like many of my colleagues in the field of librarianship, I entered the profession with a unique resumé of past experiences. Others are often shocked at my career path

from Army soldier to librarian. Fortunately for me, these diverse experiences have taught me some valuable things about leadership.

- *The library needs* you. There's a common saying in the military, 'Never volunteer for anything.' The reasoning behind this is that volunteers often end up doing extra work. Ironically, the folks who volunteer for extra duties often find themselves in a place of *leadership*. Others look up to people who volunteer to take charge of a task.

- *Be an Army of one.* The Army is all about working together as a team, with each solider performing at their own personal best. Give it your top shot – and then draw on the unique strengths of your colleagues.

- *You can do* almost *anything for a limited amount of time.* What got me through my time in the military (especially basic training) was the realization that there was an end in sight. Whether you're weeding the collection or revamping the webpage, the task isn't going to last forever.

- *Platoon – attention!* Don't be late for roll call. If you think about it, chronic tardiness is a sign of disrespect for your colleagues' time. Real leaders are organized – and punctual.

- *Follow the chain of command.* If a soldier has an issue to bring forth, he or she isn't going to go straight to the president, but to their squad leader. The issue will go up the chain of command, and hopefully be resolved somewhere near the bottom. Remember, there is a hierarchy of sensitive egos to contend with along the chain – yes, even in a library.

- *Do as I do.* Remember, as a leader, people will emulate your attitude and your actions. People have more respect for leaders who aren't afraid to 'climb into the trenches'.

- *Look out for your own.* Good military leaders ensure that all of their soldiers are safe and accounted for at all times – and if trouble appears, they are eager to stick up for one of their own.

- *Do your fieldwork.* Soldiers are trained to use a variety of equipment and techniques – even if these have little to do with their peacetime military job. So even quartermasters (launderers) know how to shoot a bazooka. Leaders must be knowledgeable in many areas.

- *Iron your uniform and shine your boots.* Yes, ironing does seem to be a waste of time, but appearances really *do* matter. Look around and you'll see – real leaders tend to *look* the part.

- *People come and go but your reputation stays.* Always be professional – even when parting along separate ways. You may think you'll never see that annoying colleague or classmate again, but chances are you just might. Only next time, they may be the one hiring *you*.

## Exercises

1. Speak with someone in your library who has more professional experience than you. Find out how they got into librarianship and the process of how they arrived at where they are. Identify how they are different from you, and, most importantly, find out how they are the same.

2. Write a letter to yourself. Begin by answering the following two questions.

   - Why do you want to be a leader?
   - What do you hope to gain from reading this book?

Date your letter. Put it in an envelope and seal it. Put the envelope in the back of this book and don't open it until you have finished reading the book. You will use this letter to complete an exercise in Chapter 8.

# What you didn't learn in your LIS program

I do not seek; I find. (Pablo Picasso)

Many library and information sciences programs have a required management course; however, there are many issues new graduates face that are not addressed in these courses. Thus new graduates are finding themselves unprepared to deal appropriately with the challenges before them as they enter the workforce.

This chapter will address many issues with which early-career professionals are confronted, and will provide suggestions on how to respond appropriately.

## Politics

Whether we like to admit it or not, all organizations are political. This can be overwhelming for new librarians, because not knowing who to trust, who to befriend or who to keep at arm's length can cause insurmountable problems. Since there are often deep divisions within organizations, a newcomer can unknowingly either get caught in the crossfire or be thrown aside, which further complicates matters.