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LEADERSHIP BRIEF: LIBRARY LEADERS OWNING LEADERSHIP

ABOUT THIS LEADERSHIP BRIEF

At the conclusion of the movie, *We Have a Pope*, the newly-elected pope tells the waiting throng in St. Peter's Square that he is more equipped "to be led than to lead." After days of soul searching, the Cardinal who was elected as a compromise candidate concluded he wasn't ready or able to own the enormous leadership challenge that had been presented to him. So he walked away.

Owning leadership means understanding and embracing the challenges, responsibilities, and expectations that come with being a leader. Whether the role is leading a worldwide religion, a local government, a major company, a small business, or a public library system, leadership is personal, situational, and challenging. Successful leaders are driven by a passion for what they do, a deep commitment to lead, and self-confidence about their status as a leader.

As public libraries broaden their reach into the communities they serve and deepen their role as an essential part of community life, the expectations of library executives are expanding as well. The extent that public libraries are seen as leaders on essential community issues, which include economic and workforce development, civic and community engagement, sustainability, public safety, and digital learning, depends on the effectiveness of a library executive as a strategic leader.

This Leadership Brief identifies five leadership themes and five roles for library executives in the rapidly changing and increasingly complex public library environment. It provides food for thought to encourage and support individual action, increased self-awareness, and ultimately success in leading the continued transformation of public libraries.

THE LEADERSHIP LANDSCAPE

The first responsibility of leadership is to define reality. The last is to say thank you.
Max DePree, Chairman Emeritus, Herman Miller, Inc.

Research on leadership is broad, deep, and constantly growing. It is, as one author explained, a well-plowed field without firm conclusions. While there is not one formula or one complete source book for leadership success, there are recurring themes in the research, writing, and practice which can offer guidance for today's library leaders. The following themes offer a framework for exploring the leadership landscape.

Leadership is more art than science.
Leadership is built around values, beliefs, relationships, passion, and emotional resources more than knowledge, technical skill, or physical resources; more of a belief and condition of the heart than a to-do list.[i] For most leaders, success at the technical, program, and management levels is the developing ground for leadership. But just as being a respected Cardinal doesn't ensure readiness to become pope, succeeding within library divisions or functions doesn't guarantee a smooth transition to library leader. Managers get quality work done productively, efficiently, and on schedule. Leaders are able to inspire people, generate optimism and hope, and guide achievement to reach beyond what is known and expected today. Both are vital to organizational success.

Leadership demands big picture thinking.
Successful leaders focus their energy and attention beyond the day-to-day. They are able to see what the organization is, what it can become, and how it fits into its surroundings. Their vision is both long range and peripheral. Leaders define a sense of purpose that shapes action, motivates employees and supporters, and builds pride as well as satisfaction. Big picture thinking is more than creating a vision. It involves balancing short term success with long term possibilities along with paying attention to both. Daniel H. Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brain Thinkers will Rule the Future*, calls this big picture capacity "symphony thinking." High performing leaders are able to orchestrate collaborative work among a variety of people all of whom are doing different things, then they see how the relationships work and the pieces fit together to identify patterns that contribute to success.[ii]

Character, credibility, and trust are vital to successful leadership.
The importance of character, credibility, and trust becomes most obvious when they are missing. Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus say, trust is the "social glue" that keeps any system together. It is hard to gain and easy to lose. [iii]

These essential leadership qualities have value beyond public perception. Leaders who are trusted and credible are better able to motivate employees, gain broad support for a vision, mobilize resources, and achieve desired results. People want to support, follow, and work alongside someone they trust, admire, believe in, as well as respect. "Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character," said General Norman Schwarzkopf. "But if you must be without one, be without the strategy."

Leaders mobilize others to achieve more than they thought possible, and then step back. They encourage and guide people to achieve results through a shared vision that is clear, desirable, and exciting. Successful leaders walk with, among, and even behind the people who will help make a vision into reality. They nurture, empower, and share leadership with colleagues, partners, and staff. "It is better to lead from behind and put others out in front especially when you celebrate victory when nice things occur," wrote Nelson Mandela. "You only take the front line when there is danger," he continued. Similarly, the ancient philosopher Lao Tsu said, "when the best leader's work is done, the people say we did it ourselves." While leadership can't be delegated, its results are best demonstrated in the achievements of others rather than the visible work of the leader.

Leaders are self-aware and self-confident. Leaders understand their strengths and limitations. They also maximize their strengths, constantly seek feedback to assess their capacity, and work with outstanding people who bring together different insights and perspectives. The best leaders are comfortable in surrounding themselves with highly skilled staff and partners,

while enjoying letting others shine. Organizations thrive when their leaders create well-rounded teams made up of people with diverse and complementary leadership skills. In their book *Strength Based Leadership*, Tom Rath and Barry Conchie identify four leadership skill areas that contribute to high performing well-rounded teams: Executing, Influencing, Relationship Building, and Strategic Thinking. "Instead of one dominant leader who tries to do everything or individuals who all have similar strengths, contributions from all four domains lead to a strong and cohesive team," Rath and Conchie wrote.[v]

THE 21ST CENTURY LIBRARY EXECUTIVE

For libraries to continue to build and sustain their position as active, trusted, and responsive agents of change in the community, their executives must see themselves as transformational leaders who move toward the future with confidence, intention, and determination. At the same time, library executives must be able to balance the community's day-to-day expectations with emerging opportunities and possibilities. That balancing act requires executives who are both visionary leaders and effective managers. Author and management trainer Stephen Covey describes the leadership/management balance the following way: management is efficiency in climbing the ladder to success while leadership determines whether the ladder is leaning against the right wall.

As the 21st century library expands its role in the community, library executives must broaden their

leadership approach to support this continuing transition. Five important roles for today's library leaders are:

- Visionary;
- Community Leader;
- Successful Manager;
- Role Model;
- Passionate Champion.

LIBRARY LEADERS AS VISIONARIES

The essence of leadership is establishing a vision and translating it into reality. Before there is a need or demand, successful leaders see possibilities to create an environment where visionary thinking is encouraged and valued. Visionary giants like Henry Ford and Steve Jobs transformed transportation and technology, respectively, well ahead of requests for new products or unfilled needs. Ford once commented that if he had asked people what they wanted to improve their mobility, they would have said faster horses. Similarly, Jobs eschewed focus groups as a source of new ideas saying, people don't know what they want until you show something new to them.

Visionary leaders are proactive. They work ahead of the customer demand curve by anticipating needs, imagining possibilities, and taking chances. A visionary library leader does more than develop a vision statement, annual goals, and strategies. Collaborative visioning processes and published strategic plans are valuable tools for defining a sense of direction and purpose, engaging others in owning the direction, and providing structure for long-term progress. Visionary leadership is an ongoing evolving process that sustains progress long after the vision statement is written.

Library leaders carry out their visionary role by:

- Constantly thinking about what the library can be rather than what it is;
- Being open to new directions, new possibilities, and "big hairy audacious goals;"[vii]
- Seeking ideas, input, and suggestions from different sources including people who aren't connected to the library;

- Anticipating opportunities, risks, and challenges that may affect the vision both positively and negatively;
- Listening to community conversations outside the library to identify trends for possible library action;
- Making library staff partners in implementing and shaping the vision;
- Encouraging and rewarding creative thinking and creative action;
- Aligning the library with the community vision, goals, and priorities;
- Participating in or leading community visioning processes for the purpose of enhancing community success and integrating the library into long-term strategies;
- Leveraging the library's stature as a trusted resource to broaden its potential and impact to become the center of opportunity and innovation;
- Connecting with other visionary leaders who can provide the gift of perspective.

LIBRARY LEADERS AS COMMUNITY LEADERS

Just as the public library is becoming a more extroverted resource, library executives are becoming extroverted leaders who contribute to community life in diverse and meaningful ways. Their work is more in the community than in the library, focusing on both library business and community challenges. Being recognized and respected as the library director in community settings is valuable; but, being recognized and respected as a community leader is even more valuable.

Library leaders carry out their community leadership role by:

Making what the library does matter in the community;

- Being visible in the community on a broad range of issues;
- Serving on boards, commissions, and advisory groups in areas beyond library business;
- Establishing relationships with community leaders and local elected officials to support their priorities as well as gain support for library priorities;
- Staying up-to-date on emerging community challenges and trends while contributing to strategies and solutions, even if those strategies don't involve the library directly;
- Offering library resources like expertise, personnel, programs, and facilities to support community priorities, create lasting partnerships, and solve local problems;
- Showing up when key issues are discussed and community decisions are made;
- Building a personal reputation as a go-to resource in the community.

LIBRARY LEADERS AS SUCCESSFUL MANAGERS

Successful leadership and effective management go hand-in-hand. "You've got to think about the big things while you're doing the small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction," said futurist Alvin Toffler. Library leaders heed that advice by ensuring that the library system is well managed, dependable, and respected as a community resource. Knowledgeable and skilled staff, solid financial management, well delivered programs, and community friendly buildings provide a foundation for broadening and deepening the library's role in the community. Visionary leadership must be backed up by dependable management.

Library leaders carry out their management role by:

- Connecting the library's vision and purpose with day-to-day operations;
- Recruiting, training, nurturing, and rewarding great staff;
- Establishing a management structure that ensures successful day-to-day operations;
- Creating and leading a well-rounded high performing team;
- Supporting trustee governing roles to ensure that the library operates from a solid and trusted governance base;
- Delegating appropriate day-to-day management responsibilities to skilled staff who are committed to the library's vision and complement the executive's approach, expertise, and operating style;
- Staying in touch with library supporters and users to ensure that programs and services continue to meet expectations;
- Seeking regular feedback on day-to-day operations and making prompt adjustments when needed.

LIBRARY EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT ROLES

- Hiring/supervising/evaluating employees;
- Overseeing day-to-day system operations;
- Developing short and long term program plans;
- Developing and implementing the annual budget;
- Evaluating and reporting on program results;
- Working closely with library trustees;
- Representing the library in the community.

LIBRARY LEADERS AS ROLE MODELS

Character and credibility are essential to successful leadership. Library leaders are stewards of the library's reputation as a trusted, safe, reliable, apolitical, and welcoming community resource. This long enduring reputation is maintained and enhanced through the programs and services that the library provides and the people who represent it, none of whom is more important than the library executive.

In addition to maintaining high standards of personal character, credibility, and trust to enhance the library's institutional reputation, library executives lead by example in everything they do. They are models of performance, service, and responsibility for their staff. How staff and colleagues approach their jobs and their connection to the library will be shaped by the executive's actions and behavior. That's why being a self-aware model is so important.

Library leaders carry out their roles as role models by:

- Adhering to the highest ethical standards in all that they do both professionally and personally;
- Promoting an ethical culture in the library system through both personal actions in addition to policies and standards which define and guide staff actions and behavior;
- Establishing, communicating, and modeling performance standards and expectations;
- Being an open, accessible, and visible leader who is known and understood;
- Regularly talking about character, credibility, trust, and ethics as library system values;
- Serving as a mentor both within the library to support and nurture staff growth as well as in the community to support young people, new immigrants, and future leaders;
- Owning the responsibility of being a role model and a mentor.

LIBRARY LEADERS AS PASSIONATE CHAMPIONS

Successful leaders exude energy, meaning, purpose, and passion. Their passion is contagious and compelling. "There's no one more believable than a person with a deep passion for something," write James Kouzes and Barry Posner. "There's no one more fun to be around than someone who is openly excited about the magic that can happen."[viii] Library leaders motivate and inspire others by being passionate champions for the library and its role in the community. Passion raises people's aspirations about what

they can do, what they can become, and what is possible.

Library leaders carry out their passionate champion role by:

- Focusing with razor sharp attention on the library vision and desired results;
- Communicating often about the library's purpose and vision;
- Creating opportunities to celebrate success;
- Using tools like slogans, events, "blue sky notebooks,"[ix] t-shirts, and other creative ideas to translate personal passion into a compelling spirit both inside and outside of the library;
- Empowering library staff by making work exhilarating, encouraging individual action, and making individuals feel significant;
- Being optimistic and positive about the community's future and the library's role in it.

LIBRARY EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP ROLES

- Establishing and regularly communicating a compelling vision;
- Anticipating opportunities, risks, and challenges;
- Being recognized and respected as a community leader;
- Running a top-notch library system;
- Modeling high standards of character, credibility, trust, ethics, performance, and responsibility;
- Exuding energy, meaning, purpose, and passion;
- Constantly assessing, rethinking, and investing in personal leadership development.

OWNING LEADERSHIP

Going to bed at night saying we've done something wonderful – that's what motivates me.
Steve Jobs

Library leaders are already making a remarkable difference in the communities they serve. They have led to the public library transformations from "quiet repositories of books and information" to active, engaged, innovative agents of change.[x] Library leaders have created broad, community based resources that few could have envisioned even 10 years ago. They have filled gaps when no other resource was there and introduced new opportunities before a gap occurred. That's leadership.

But there are always emerging challenges and opportunities ahead and more magic that can happen. Library executives must build continued capacity for the future by encouraging leadership at all levels of their organizations, so that libraries can continue to transform communities in remarkable ways.

Today's public library is an essential community resource that strengthens economic vitality, improves literacy, supports workforce development, bridges the digital divide, opens doors for new immigrants, promotes civic engagement, and more. Tomorrow's public library will be shaped by the vision, energy, passion, and skill of leaders who step up to take on new responsibilities that continue to extend far beyond traditional library roles; and in the process, they will do something wonderful for their communities.

LEADERSHIP RESOURCES

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Endnotes
[i.] *Adapted in part from Max DePree, Leadership is an Art (New York: Currency Doubleday), 1987, 1989, 1990, 2004).*
[ii.] *Daniel Pink on A Whole New Mind, interview with ICMA*

Executive Director Robert J. O'Neill (Washington, DC: International City-County Management Association, 2008).
[iii.] *Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1985, 1997, 2003, 2007), page xiv.*
[iv.] *Warren Bennis and Joan Goldsmith, Learning to Lead (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1997), pages xv-xvi.*
[v.] *Tom Rath and Barry Conchie, Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow (New York: Gallup Press, 2008), page 7.*
[vi.] *James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, The Leadership Challenge, Fourth Edition (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), page 14.*
[vii.] *Jim Collins, Good to Great (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), pages 197-204.*
[viii.] *Kouzes and Posner, page 152.*
[ix.] *Calgary Public Library CEO gives his employees what he calls "blue sky" notebooks to take into the community to record "wicked, innovative new ideas" and to "bring flash to the obvious."*
[x.] *Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein, Better Together: Restoring the American Community (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).*