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Perspectives on Leadership: An Interview with Amed Demirhan

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Interview with Amed Demirhan

By Eric C. Shoaf



Amed Demirhan

Librarianship can be a challenging profession, and some parts of the world have much more challenging social and economic circumstances affecting all types of public institutions. Such is the case in Iraq, the present location of our interview subject. Amed Demirhan was born in Northern Kurdistan (Turkish part of Kurdistan) and was educated at American universities, earning an MLS from the University of Southern Mississippi and an MA from Wayne State University. His language proficiencies range from Kurdish, Swedish, and Turkish to Spanish and English. Demirhan has contributed to numerous newspapers and online news portals as a columnist in international affairs. He was appointed in September 2006 to build a new library for the then newly established University of Kurdistan Hawler (UKH), an English-language university in northern Iraq. He quickly discovered the challenge of international transportation of books and serious limitations of the local market in building a library collection. However, over the past three years, the university has prospered and the library grown along with it.

Q: One would expect that building a university library in Iraq has been a challenge. What actions have led to successes?

When one works in a post-war environment or in a developing country, one will encounter many unforeseeable conditions. The situation sometimes is very static and sometimes very fluid but hardly ever “normal.” Therefore, one has to be very flexible but patient and persistent in pursuit of the main goals. To be more concrete, I could say the following were very important, but not necessarily in this order:

- Having a clear vision and mission that is relevant to the community and in line with the university founders’ vision. I will talk about this more later.
- Taking initiative and leading in library matters: don’t wait; no one is going to tell you how to do something or what to do.
- Hiring the right staff members for the right job.
- Communicating across the university about library development (new additions, information literacy, new services) or about the needs of the library; reinforcing communication on an ongoing basis, particularly in

writing, but following up verbally to appropriate committees and venues.

- Developing staff hiring policies and procedures in accordance with professional values and standards that are internationally acceptable. Insisting on professional standards, for example, by enforcing copyrights, defending academic freedom, implementing equal opportunity policies, and more.
- Committing to offer the highest level of service to the students and staff. Providing ongoing advocacy of the value of the library for communities (university and wider communities).
- Being emotionally intelligent; this is particularly important in this kind of environment. As the institution is in a building/development process, many rules and regulations are not necessarily in place or yet established; therefore, one could face many conflicts that would be avoidable otherwise. Handling human territoriality in a less or unregulated environment requires strong emotional intelligence.
- Thinking strategically and longer term. Having the ability to read social and political conditions properly. Keeping communication at all levels professional, regardless of conditions or circumstances. Building confidence among employees and premier customers (student and staff) by applying the policies in a consistent manner.
- Serving the wider community. For example, by doing volunteer work to train other university library managers and staff in the region created good publicity and goodwill. It reinforced the commitment to serve the greater communities. In other words, this demonstrated that I am not just preaching right things, but I am doing right things, too.
- Practicing transparency. The library at UKH was the first department of the university to publish its work report online, making it available to everyone who is interested. Applying library policies that build trust on the use of equal access. Training staff about the “library bill of rights” and “code of ethics,” and library services and concepts, all of which improve quality of service.
- Developing international and regional cooperation. Establishing rules and regulations but enforcing them consistently to create institutional credibility.
- Creating a library advisory committee that has representatives from all members of the academic departments—student union, registrar, finance, and information technology support services. This has created an opportunity for a democratic participation of all stakeholders in the decision-making process and to help to further the library cause.

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- Becoming a member of the American Library Association and its divisions, which has helped to build the international profile of the UKH library and has contributed to staff development.
- Building good relations with locally hired university staff because they provide the best access to local knowledge. Every one of them is expert in something local regardless of their position. Most information is not organized yet, there are not enough directories about local market and local traditions, and more, these make good relations with local staff more important. Keeping everything documented and open as much as possible.

Q: The library’s website (www.ukh.ac/library) has mission and vision statements on the homepage. Can you describe the importance of these statements and how they were developed?

The library mission and vision statements are fundamental guides to library development and direction. The vision of an organization is the soul of that organization and reflects its values. Library creation is based on this vision and mission. When I came to Hawler, the capital of the Kurdistan Federal Region in Iraq, to work at the newly established university, the first Rector of UKH told me that the founder of the university, the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region Mr. Nechirvan Barzani, had asked him to build a university to the highest Western standard. This was my instruction. One has to take in consideration the local, regional, and global needs when designing a library mission and vision statement. After studying and thinking about how this library should be built for this university and region, I started to develop the mission and the vision for the library. I already had very good knowledge about the country history, culture, and diverse population. It had to be realistic and easily understandable and defendable. After approval by the academic committee, it became operational.

Every newly hired staff member has to learn about the vision and mission of the library and has to understand why we have that. During university staff inductions and information literacy classes we always start with our mission and vision. The library staff hiring procedures, job announcements, staff development, and library services are based on these elements. If one examines the UKH library work report, job announcements, and interview questions, one can see it is a reflection of the library mission and vision. The mission and vision are sources of the library’s operation and direction. It is our public commitment to our users, client, and patrons—what we are doing and what we will do.

Q: What sort of training did you receive over your career that has been the most useful in your role as director?

Having a well-known and accomplished mentor like the late Dr. Donald E. Riggs, former dean of the University of Michigan libraries and later the vice president of Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, was a great good fortune for me and a wonderful source of inspiration. Dr. Riggs introduced me to theories of leadership, particularly library leadership, about which he himself was a leading writer and practitioner in the field. I learned many valuable things from him, such as the importance of mission, vision, strategic planning, public service, and outreach.

Attending the Sun Seekers Leadership Institute (2003–2004) in the Southeast Florida Library Information Network (<http://seflin.org>) was very helpful. In addition to providing theoretical knowledge, this training introduced me to some very important things; the participants were from all kind of libraries from southeast Florida. Because of that I learned about other libraries and their issues, successes, internal relations, and more. Another aspect of this training was that in every meeting the participant had an opportunity to hear a successful library leader’s vision and advice for the success and importance of leadership.

Meeting Mr. Tom Sloan, the executive director of the Southeast Florida Library Information Network, was another great benefit of the Sun Seekers program (Sloan is now the executive director of DuPage Library System in Illinois). Mr. Sloan has been a source of inspiration and encouragement since then— particularly since my arrival in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, his support and advice have been very important. I have learned many things from him and he is one of my role models.

Finally, working in Broward County Joint Academic and Public Library was a very important learning experience about diverse clientele and their needs. Drawing from my international, multilingual, and multicultural experiences has been very useful, in addition to my library-related training.

Q: What attributes do you consider essential for a leader, and why?

It is well known that there are many attributes of successful leadership. The late Dr. Riggs used to say that there are at least one hundred definitions of leadership. From these, some attributes are consistently and universally on the top—honesty, integrity, and positive thinking. I think the value of honesty and integrity is self evident. However, in increasingly volatile and changing environments, these values become more important. Your employees, your customers, partners, and others should be able to count on you and trust you to carry on your vision and mission, or to

respect it, or to help implement it. For example, you cannot develop good customer service if the vendor you are working with will not deliver your goods and services on time.

Positive thinking has a great impact on those you are working with, particularly in difficult times and in a challenging environment. It makes a big difference when one starts the work day with a smile and good greetings, and these are the things we don't have even to pay for.

In the global context, the ability to communicate across cultures and social groups and to be open-minded are most critical. Accepting differences of values and cultures is fundamental for leaders. However, this doesn't mean adopting others' values and ways of life, but rather, recognizing and respecting them or respectfully disagreeing. We have all grown up with certain values, assumptions, and prejudices; therefore, the ability to recognize reality and overcome one's own assumptions and prejudices is very important to effective leadership in different parts of the world.

Q: Tell us about use of the library at UKH. How do students and faculty interact there, and what is the library's role in the academic process?

The library is very well used by the students. In a recent survey, 68 percent of the students said they use the library at least once a day, and there are other students who use it more than once a day. Some faculty members come to the library with their students, while some prefer to use the library's online resources from their offices. All faculty, staff, and students are always invited to the library for information literacy classes or individual tutoring about the library resources and how to use them. Relations between and among students and faculty are very good, and the library is doing its best to work with them to attract as many of them as possible. The library provides students with unrestricted Internet access and wireless access. The students at UKH are very motivated and interested to learn. Many resources in the library are very new for them, and these create more interest. The library tries its best to create a very comfortable and welcoming environment for its users. In January of this year, one of the university's Access Program/English Language students, Ms. Lilan Loai, worked on a project about the library available now on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=mC0lxq4RKuc). I think this could be very useful to see how students describe the library at UKH.

The library director is a member of the University Academic Board and several other relevant academic committees, and the deputy library director also represents the library on several committees. In short, the library is well represented in the academic decision-making process. The library has been persistently insistent about participating in university-wide committees and decision-making processes.

Q: What are the most challenging parts of your job as library director?

I have learned to see challenges as an opportunity and to learn more than anything else. Some of the fundamental challenges are related to the concept of the modern Western library. This could relate to public service, the copyrights issue, and more. Another challenge is that all teaching faculty members are either people from different countries, mainly English speaking, or members of the Kurdish Diaspora who were educated in the West and are from highly diverse backgrounds. Both collection development and finding qualified staff, even library assistants, have been serious challenges. This diversity may be considered a very great asset, but at the same time, in the institution-building process, it could create a serious challenge.

As indicated in the mission statement, the library is open to the general public, but with certain restrictions. For example, members of the general public cannot borrow a book, but can read in the library and they can have unrestricted Internet access and access to other library resources. But the students and staff of the university always have priority. I was once seriously challenged by the university's former senior academic advisor who was from a prestigious British university and think tank. He could not accept this policy. We had a lengthy discussion on the subject of the importance of open access to the public, particularly when there is hardly a functioning library in the region. I am a firm believer that one shouldn't reinvent the wheel; but sometimes it is easier to reinvent the wheel than convince some people of the importance of the existing one. There have been other people opposed to library open access for the general public. One has to constantly defend this kind of policy despite it being well established in most Western countries, especially in the United States.

Our copyright policy was very challenging to establish, first of all because of our location. Particularly in earlier years, we had very limited access to library materials. We had to import most of our materials in small quantities; therefore, they were very expensive. The students were accustomed to copying entire books in the local market "Bazaar" or buying pirated books printed in some regional countries. During the Saddam era, piracy was "legalized" and universities "officially" reprinted books in violation of international laws. On the one hand, not being able to provide the books to the students, and on the other hand, insisting on copyrights, created a big dilemma and conflict.

I would like to share this experience. One day, one of the university English teachers arrived with some twenty English grammar books, and he wanted the library to reimburse him. (The library has to approve all book purchasing.) He had paid about \$4 per book and one was even one of my favorites. When I told the teacher, "Sorry I can't reimburse you for this," he was furious because his

students needed this book, and this book is one of the best on the subject. I agreed with him, but the book was pirated and it is against library policy to pay for pirated books or materials. The same book is \$45, plus shipping and handling, on Amazon, but we have to refuse to buy it for \$4 despite our students needing it. As one can imagine, this creates a serious ethical and economic dilemma. Fortunately, the copyright rule is now well respected by the students and staff.

Collection development was a serious challenge from the beginning, except for our electronic collections. It was easy for the faculty and university administration to accept library authority in choosing databases and other online open-access sources, but it was not so easy for the print collection. We had to work very hard to convince the faculty and administration about library expertise for the print collection, and initially administration wanted to rely exclusively on faculty and teachers' recommendations for the collection, but gradually library expertise became accepted. This took more than three years, however. Transportation of the print materials and ability to access professional collection development tools were very limited, too.

Finding qualified staff has been an ongoing challenge. Being an English-language institution and having high demand for quality public service makes it more difficult to find even a good library assistant. The one we find we have to train to bring the level of service to the Western standard, so a staffing shortage is ongoing. Another disadvantage for us is that we are competing with private companies for the same quality of staff—a college graduate with

good English skills. Because the Kurdistan federal region is rapidly developing, there are many private companies that pay high salaries. This puts the library in a more difficult position when seeking appropriate staff.

Diversity is one of the greatest challenges in institution building. While in most established Western universities, diversity is considered an asset, during institution building it creates a great challenge. In established institutions, certain rules, regulations, and institutional culture are in place, and therefore the newcomer has to fit in to a certain degree. However, in new institutions, all of these are missing. Therefore, everyone tries to impose their individual experience and will on others, and this creates many conflicts. As one who studied dispute resolution in graduate school, I don't think conflict is good or bad, but management of conflict will impact the outcome. Because most people can't manage the conflict, we tend to believe it is bad.

Another challenge to diversity is the fluidity of faculty members. Currently, I am the only senior administrator who has been on board since the establishment of the university. Most heads of department I work with are the third, fourth, or even fifth person who has held that position, and I presently work under the third university president (vice chancellor). I have had to restart with many of them and go through many things that my staff and I have been through before. However, I consider these to be great learning opportunities, to be able to work with so many different managers and heads of departments.