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Perspectives on Leadership: An Interview with Hampton "Skip" Auld

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Interview with Hampton “Skip” Auld

by Eric C. Shoaf

Skip Auld is director at the Durham (N.C.) County Public Library system, and in this capacity he manages and directs operations at the main library and its seven branches. Auld is a seasoned library professional with over twenty-five years of progressive library experience and has extensive experience in strategic planning, staff and organizational development, collection and technology management, legislative advocacy, facility planning, design, and construction. He has served as an elected member of the governing bodies of the American Library Association and the Public Library Association and has published extensively in library professional journals.



Hampton “Skip” Auld

Q: How do you define leadership?

Everyone needs to be a leader at certain times in their lives. This goes for home life, work life, and life in general. To me, leadership is the development of skills and talents to be used in the engagement of other people for improving services, organizations, families, the workplace, and life generally. To be a leader is to listen well to those with whom you live, work, or socialize. To be a leader is to understand your own purpose in life. To be a leader is to figure out how to engage others for the advancement and improvement of life. Leadership is having vision and integrity, being credible with people with whom you work and with people whom you serve, and caring about people. It is creating clarity and focus on strategy, outcomes, and actions that you want people to take to achieve the purpose and vision you develop with the community you serve.

Leadership is commitment to causes, to purpose, and to people. It is taking risks and being willing to fail, having the confidence that your vision and purpose are worthy because they are grounded in positive, community-based values. Leadership is hungering for innovation, good and valuable innovation in service of the greater good of your community. It is mentoring, understanding different levels of readiness for change, realizing that while some people are radical change agents, others must take a step at a time.

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Leadership is engaging people on many levels of creativity, knowing that people think and see and perceive differently. It represents an openness to visual, metaphorical, kinesthetic, interpersonal, intuitive, emotional, and holistic ways of being and doing, as contrasted with “problem-solving” in analytical, rational, goal-oriented ways. All are important. It’s valuable to understand the world of passions, dreams, and stories of people’s lives at work and at home, just as it’s valuable to be professional and seek efficiencies through the world of data, plans, and reports. Leadership in the community, beyond the workplace, is working with many stakeholders to understand what is politically desirable in order to refocus attention back in the workplace and with partner organizations on what is administratively feasible. Leadership, especially in our modern world, is honoring the vast cultural diversity of our communities and workplaces and working for racial and social justice even as we seek workplace-oriented goals and objectives crafted through our strategic planning efforts. It is working to inspire others to know their efforts are valued and their hard work is important in improving the world in which we all live.

Q: In your role as library director, what are ways in which you demonstrate leadership?

I try to be sensitive to people’s needs. As simple as that sounds, it’s often complex and difficult. It’s one of the most important things to do, to care about people. If you cannot be trusted, you can be lost at sea. I encourage participation and I believe people must be engaged in the process of developing changes that affect them. It’s a basic “total quality” way of working. While valuing our people, I focus completely on our customers or community or clientele or users or whatever you prefer to call them. Four of the five Ranganathan laws are customer-focused: (1) books are for use, (2) every person his or her book, (3) every book its reader, and (4) save the time of the reader.

Q: How are you using leadership principles to transform the Durham County Public Library system?

The core leadership principles we’re using are the following, all based on total quality management:

- Customer focus
- Staff involvement in decisions that directly affect them
- Data-driven decision making

In addition, we are mindful of principles of organizational change and development. People deal with change in different ways. We honor that and allow staff to take on

change at their own pace as much as possible. Sometimes when I feel things are moving slowly, others among our frontline staff, middle management, and administration tell me that the pace of change is very fast.

Q: Tell us some opportunities that middle management staff in your library have to be active leaders?

We have middle managers as well as frontline staff serving as goal champions ensuring that we accomplish the goals and objectives of our strategic plan, "Saying Yes to the Community." As goal champions, they are part of our strategic planning council. We also have middle managers and frontline staff on our quality councils, which include Customer Service, Staff Development, Emerging Technologies, and others. I believe every staff member is a leader in some way.

Q: How is leadership important during times of shrinking budgets?

Budgets are always shrinking. If they're not actually shrinking, then people think they are shrinking relative to inflation. That goes for salaries, collection budgets, everything really. No one ever thinks she or he has enough money or staffing. Leadership is important to put life and budgets in perspective. We have what we have. We will do the best we can with what we have, as we always do. Attitude is everything. We're in the business of accomplishing miracles. Our community and our coworkers depend on us to do that. The work we do is important!

Q: Is there a particular model of planning that you find works well for you and your library?

The library developed a unique strategic planning process in working with well-known consultants during my first year as director. Our planning was developed around the concept of being very community-based, understanding that we aren't simply in the "library business" but that we are in the "Durham business." The steps in the process were:

- Visioning at our Staff Development Day in December 2006. All library staff addressed the question, "What will it mean for Durham County Library to be selected in three years as the LJ Library of the Year?"
- Forming a strategic planning steering committee made up about equally of staff and community members.
- Bus trips with community members and staff to visit and observe best practices at public libraries in

Richmond, Virginia, Greensboro, North Carolina, and Charlotte, North Carolina.

- Convening a two-day future search conference made up primarily of about seventy-five community members and a dozen staff members.

Q: What do you see as critical to the mission of the public library in 2010 and beyond?

Among other things, I believe public libraries should be all about access, equity, convenience, learning, service, and stewardship. Generally speaking, the scope of our efforts as a library system are:

- Resources, including:
 - Staff, our most important and critical resource, from recruitment to training and continuing staff development.
 - Collections, which are customer-responsive (sufficient materials of greatest interest to users so they do not have to wait two to three weeks, a month or more *and* meeting the broadest interests of the Durham community).
 - Technology, including developing classes and training for the public.
 - Facilities, which in Durham County are in the midst of rapid expansion and development.
- Services, including:
 - Circulation, or customer services
 - Reference
 - Readers' advisory
 - Programming

I crafted a personal vision statement some years ago:

I believe in the promise of libraries as the most vital places where people of all ages gather to freely pursue knowledge, information and enjoyment of life. Libraries should provide innovative and traditional services at the greatest possible convenience to customers in the most cost-effective way.

I see one of my primary roles as helping staff at all levels find ways to make library services innovative, vital, convenient, and focused on the needs of our users. I also believe that Durham County Library is in the Durham business, not just the library business. We will continue to work with county and city agencies and nonprofit organizations to be an "urban asset" and a partner in meeting the critical needs of all our residents. Our libraries are great places to pursue knowledge, information, and enjoyment of life!