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On Leading and Being Led: Neither is a Passive Role

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On leading and being led

Neither is a passive role

The concept of leadership is complex and often defined by differentiating the leader and the follower. The leader leads and the follower is led. In the hierarchical library organizational structure, there are leaders at many levels, and, as a result, the leader both leads and is led.

This is but one of the dynamics explored in a fascinating book on leadership. *Leading From the Middle* by John Lubans, Jr. distills Lubans' 30 plus years in librarianship and 15 years of writing about leadership into a collection of relatively short yet informative essays on leading and leadership.¹

I am struck particularly by Lubans' idea about leading from the middle. Using examples as diverse as Southwest Airlines, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and the Outward Bound wilderness organization, he looks at how understanding the leadership principles crucial to their successes can transfer to the library setting.

Along the way, Lubans develops the idea of leaders as followers and followers as leaders. It may seem to be a somewhat arbitrary distinction, but what Lubans calls *followership* is an important part of the productive organization. A corollary is that followership is not a passive experience, neither being directed, supervised, overseen, or managed.

According to Lubans, good followers understand how to join in the organization's mission, how to adopt the values, and most of all, how to instill a sense of empowerment among other staff members to do the same. In this way, everyone is a leader, leading "from the middle" as Lubans puts it.

To some this may smack of the library reorganization craze of the 1990s. Long-timers in the library profession remember teams, flattening the hierarchy, total quality management, and other organizational approaches to bring the library up to speed if not up to date. Lubans was in the middle of administrating a number of these reorganizations, so he is well-positioned to comment on their efficacy. Some of them worked and have helped libraries develop in response to the rapidly changing technology used by library patrons to find information more quickly and easily, as well as by library staff to automate processing.

Others were not successful, and Lubans offers explanations with inspiration from far-flung sources: trips to Guatemala, Australia, Italy, and more locally to California, Maine, and Virginia. His view is that facing personal physical challenges is excellent preparation for the challenges of librarianship in the new millennium.

An interesting quote, "the perfect is the enemy of good," is attributed to Voltaire. Sitting in yet another meeting the other day, looking for creative solutions to new problems in the library, it struck me that one of the sharpest arrows in the obstructionist's quiver is, "But what if we do that and xxxx happens? We must solve xxxx first!" As new plans are vetted and implementation discussed, there

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are always a couple of staff members who are reluctant to make changes without anticipating and accounting for every potential outcome. Perhaps perfection is the enemy of good implementation because many in the library profession seem to want to solve all the problems, real and imagined, associated with a new idea before it gets put into action. They have difficulty accepting that it is often not possible to forestall every outcome and consequence, intended or not. As library leaders, it is important to have the skills to bring the overly concerned to a place of comfort with the ambiguity that comes with new ideas and ways of doing things. In short, it is an opportunity to lead from the middle, as Lubans would say.

While management and leadership are not the same thing, many use the words interchangeably. And they are very much part of the same branch on the tree, fused to each other in many ways. But the root of management is managing. In any new activity or procedure, there will be planning prior to implementation. But the key to success will be to manage the implementation as it rolls out and through the process. In this case, managing is tracking the roll-out and dealing with issues as they arise, solving problems and creating solutions as they are called for.

Leading is one of the tools of management, and Lubans has several examples of how coaching and collaboration have proven to be successful in the library environment. His analysis of the Duke University women's basketball team is an excellent case study.

After spending a year attending team practices, strategy sessions, and games, he finds a number of ideas that transfer to implementation of new plans. The most prescient: never forget that there is no magic bullet that will solve every problem.

Planning is important, but once the plan is in place, then managing it to success is equally important. Sometimes, frontline personnel are so focused on the specific applications of new processes that they get bogged down in the details and want answers to every concern, real and perceived. This is not always possible. Help them understand their role in managing a new implementation. Make them a part of the problem-solving team, and give them confidence to deal with the unintended consequences of change. Lubans promotes the PDCA system (plan, do, check, act), pioneered by Edward Deming, which allows for this sort of approach.

We shouldn't let the pursuit of perfection derail good implementation plans, and we can lead those plans (perfectly?) from the middle to success. Lubans' book is filled with advice and messages such as this, and it is both readable and "thumb-able," meaning you can just open it up, start reading, and become absorbed into the narrative. There may not be a better recommendation than that for professional reading.

Note

1. John Lubans, *Leading from the middle* (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2010). ¶

("The accidental mentorship" cont. from page 101)

Notes

1. Steven Covey, "Who are your mentors?" Retrieved July 27, 2009, from orlando.jobing.com/video_details.asp?segment=19370&i=45882.
2. S. Ginsberg, "The Three types of mentors. Hello, my name is BLOG!" Retrieved June 3, 2009, from hellomynameisscott.blogspot.com/.
3. Brigham Young University, Human Resources. (n.d.) "Brigham Young University

Manger's Toolbox: Student mentoring," Retrieved June 3, 2009, from training.BrighamYoungUniversity.edu/documents/t-student.pdf.

4. M. McCarthy and T. Mangione (2000), "How Undergraduate Students Identify and Utilize Informal Mentors," *NACADA Journal* 20 Fall (2) p.31-37.

5. Brigham Young University, "Brigham Young University Manger's Toolbox: Student mentoring." ¶