

# The librarian as a leader: development of leadership in the library and information profession

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## Abstract

*A literature review was conducted to identify articles on leadership in the library and information profession since 2011. Articles identified were examined in terms of demand for leadership skills and supply of professional development opportunities. The leadership profile of skills and competencies is diverse: flexibility is the key within the rapidly changing landscape of the profession. Available training and development opportunities range from formal training programmes to low-cost approaches that can be easily implemented by individuals or within organisations.*

*Key words:* leadership; libraries; staff development; librarians.

## Background

In 2011, the authors published a training needs analysis (TNA) of Health Library and Information Managers (HLIMs) to identify leadership skills required and leadership styles (1). Leadership remains an important facet of professional practice; it has increased in prominence in recent years as the library and information profession has had to adapt within a time of rapid and fundamental change (2). In an era of recession and decreasing budgets, it is important to enhance the leadership skills of existing members of staff (3), and lead from “within” as recruitment to new leadership roles is becoming increasingly rare.

Leadership skills and competencies remain difficult to define, and there is a little consensus on the profile that makes for an effective leader (4). Unfortunately, in the absence of a “magic checklist” identifying potential leaders remains difficult (5). However, trying to reach a consensus on a single leadership profile may not even be appropriate within such an evolving field, an emphasis on flexibility and continual innovation and change may be a more appropriate approach (6).

## Objectives

This article aims to provide an update on the current demand for leadership skills and ways of supplying opportunities to meet these development needs.

## Methods

A literature search was conducted on the Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA) database via

ProQuest in October 2014. Thesaurus and free-text terms relating to leadership skills, training, career and professional development in the library and information profession were utilised. The search was limited to publications from 2011-2014 to identify literature published since the authors’ leadership article for *Health Information and Libraries Journal* (HILJ) in 2011 (1).

## Results

293 references were retrieved from the literature search. The titles of all 293 references were examined, and 102 were identified as relevant. All 102 references were imported into Mendeley reference management tool, and further examined for relevance, particularly in relation to leadership skills and training and development opportunities. The themes identified are outlined below.

## Leadership skills

When discussing leadership skills, authors often use the language of future planning, leaders are described as “visionary”, being able to see “potential”, and having the ability to think strategically (7, 8, 9). Leaders are required to innovate and to monitor future trends (8). Communication is the key, specifically the facility to engage with others. This may be through public speaking, which is noted as something good leaders do well, but it is an area in which many potential and experienced leaders feel themselves to be lacking (10). The art of storytelling can be particularly useful in this regard (10). Being able to empower others, understanding what motivates them, and leading by example are all noted as facets of leading a team (6). Leaders are required to have

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good mentoring skills, in order to assist library and information staff to develop their skills (11).

Mindfulness has received increasing attention in a professional context in recent years, and mindfulness in library leadership is no different. Mindful Leadership is defined as “*intentionally paying attention in a non-judgmental way and being present in the moment.*” In this way, mindful leaders are able to influence others, a key leadership skill (5).

Relating to mindfulness, emotional intelligence is also referred to in this context (12). Leaders who are emotionally intelligent “*display self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management abilities*” (5). A study of public library branch managers in Northern Ireland found that being able to empathise with staff, being self-aware and being able to recognise emotions in staff were all considered to be important management traits (13).

When speaking of mindfulness and emotional intelligence in leaders, authors refer to the need to balance these qualities with what is described as “*resonance*”. Resonant leaders “*manage their emotions, read individuals and groups accurately, and create a climate to move everyone together in a positive direction*” (5). Overall, there is no single model of what constitutes “*a leader*”; commentators frequently refer to the need for flexibility together with the ability “*to adjust one’s vision*” (12).

### **Training and development opportunities**

We encountered a wealth of suggestions on how to develop leadership skills when reviewing the recent library literature. Formal courses and training programmes range from in-house training through to collaborations across organisations with many professional associations offering leadership training programmes. However, in addition, we identified multiple low-cost, self-directed ideas that might easily be included within ongoing professional development, the focus of the remainder of the article.

#### *Mentoring and coaching*

As well as being highlighted as a leadership skill in its own right, mentoring is an important factor in enabling leadership (14). Note that mentoring does not necessarily need to be a face-to-face experience, The American Library Association (ALA) Library Leadership & Management Association (LLAMA) Mentoring Program launched a distance mentoring (e-mentoring) program in 2007 (15). Looking beyond the profession, business coaching is seen as a cost-effective way to enhance professional development (16).

#### *Observation*

Observing other leaders can offer a practical context to leadership skills. Potential leaders are advised to observe leadership mistakes as well as successes, to identify techniques that do not work and that they must therefore avoid (17).

#### *Peer-support and networking*

Engaging with your peers can be a very effective way of developing leadership skills. As with mentoring, this can take place in a face-to-face context (for example at meetings, events, conferences and other networking opportunities), or online. Turku University of Applied Sciences in Finland put together a training programme aimed at library directors, who made use of Facebook and the University’s e-learning environment to network outside of the face-to-face meetings (18). Existing communities may offer the potential for networking, for example the Dow Jones Knowledge Professionals Alliance which “*aims to offer an opportunity for information professionals to share information and learn from each other*” (19).

#### *Reading*

Reading is often referred to as a useful way to develop leadership, particularly reading outside the library and information and profession (20). In addition to textbooks, potential library leaders are encouraged to read fiction and biographies to identify successes and mistakes (21). This may be an activity that you can share with others, your colleagues and peers. For example, staff at Brigham Young University in the USA hold professional development book clubs to develop professional and leadership skills (22).

### **Discussion**

During the TNA of HLIMs conducted by the authors, leadership skills were mapped to the *Influencing Skills Styles Profile* by Manning and Robertson, which identifies four influencing styles (Opportunistic-Collaborator, Opportunistic-Battler, Strategic-Collaborator, Strategic-Battler) (1). In examining the recent literature, leadership style continues to be a topic that gains attention. Entrepreneurial leadership is seen as a valuable style to meet changing information needs in times of financial constraint (23). This particular style links to the focus in the literature on innovation and creativity (24), and the idea of being a “*thought leader*” (25). Innovation suggests new ways of thinking, so what will be the requisite competencies of the library and information leader of the future? The digital age will continue to exert an influence; transitional thinking is required, moving from initial awareness building to a full operation as we complete a shift towards becoming an “*information society*” (26). Jordan presents a list of research-based competencies, of

which “*demonstrating leadership*” is one, but others on the list map leadership skills identified from the current literature (27). This list could offer a good starting point for individuals or organisations planning their professional development in this regard.

### Conclusion

Leadership continues to be an important part of the library and information professional role, and will become increasingly so as the profession continues to change rapidly. Library and information professionals will benefit from guidance on the competencies required and

availability of professional development opportunities, including formal training and more informal activities and networks. Support from organisations and professional associations will be useful in identifying and developing future leaders from within the profession. Individual librarians, potential leaders of the future, may derive encouragement from the fact that many leadership skills can be observed, modelled or practised within low budget or resource hungry environments.

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