

Lift off to leadership: elevate your impact by cultivating skills and mindset for working with senior leaders. Reflective highlights from EAHIL 2024

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Abstract

Effective communication with organizational decision-makers is paramount for health sciences library leadership success. This paper reflects on an interactive workshop at EAHIL 2024, "Lift off to leadership: elevate your impact by cultivating skills and mindset for working with senior leaders." We explore the importance of starting with the core purpose of library initiatives and the significance of emotionally connecting with stakeholders. A case example of proposing an electronic health record-integrated educational resource system illustrates the necessity of tailoring communication to diverse stakeholders' goals. Additionally, we emphasize shared language and contextually appropriate data in crafting compelling business cases. These skills help librarians present impactful proposals to fellow senior leaders, fostering collaborations and driving impactful outcomes.

Key words: leadership; communication; stakeholders; business skills; libraries, medical.

Background

Imagine you're a library leader with a big decision to make. Maybe you're a hospital library at risk of becoming part of the estimated 30% decline, possibly after a change in leadership (1). Perhaps, the organization is changing strategy and is considering restructuring. Or happily, maybe you have come up with a brilliant project you want to gain senior leadership support on. In all three of these scenarios, understanding how to connect and communicate with your organizational decision-makers is vitally important to position yourself for a better chance of success. In this paper, we reflect on our interactive workshop at EAHIL 2024 to offer some key points from "Lift off to leadership: elevate your impact by cultivating skills and mindset for working with senior leaders."

Building connections

Simon Sinek – ethnographer, author, and speaker – advocates that we should always start with our why (2). He describes why as a core belief or purpose (2). When

we talk about our libraries, what do we generally start with? Our collections? Services? Users? In their research on value propositions, set through the lens of Sinek's model, Straker and Nussem found that most organizations focused on communicating their what (3). This makes sense, given that "the what" is generally the most tangible in terms of measuring performance or outcomes. For example, libraries traditionally focus on proclaiming their whats: "We have 3 libraries across the university," "Search over 10 million library items," or "More than 100,000 people walk through our library doors every month." However, it is noted that value is also about the "emotional relationship" (3). When talking to our senior leaders, how do we emotionally connect to the purpose of what we're proposing or advocating?

Part of this emotional connection relies on understanding who your stakeholders are and what they value. For example, consider the scenario where you, as the leader of an academic medical library, would like to propose

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a project to implement a comprehensive electronic health record (EHR) integrated educational resource system. The proposed project's goal would be to integrate educational resources directly into the EHR system used by the hospital and medical school. This integration would provide seamless access to medical literature, clinical guidelines, and evidence-based practice resources at the point of care to enhance clinical decision support. Additionally, such a project would provide medical students and residents with up-to-date evidence-based resources directly through the EHR, enhancing their learning experience during rotations and clerkships. You have identified that the hospital's Chief Financial Officer (CFO), the Assistant Dean of Education of the medical school, the director of Information Technology, and clinical personnel are all potential stakeholders in this project. Does the CFO have the same set of goals and objectives as the Assistant Dean? Are you going to pitch your project to each of these stakeholders in the same way? Probably not, even though each should be considered an equal stakeholder in the project.

To increase the likelihood of success in gaining stakeholder buy-in for your proposed project, it is important to realize all stakeholders hold critical value to the success of the operation (or project) and need to be considered as part of your overall strategy (4). For instance, the CFO may be concerned with the long-term financial investment for a project, whereas the Assistant Dean may be more concerned with the impact on the overall educational outcomes for medical students, curriculum integration, and student engagement. Crafting a business case that can consider and address the interests of primary stakeholders – even when their goals differ – is key to facilitating effective conversations on both fronts and garnering buy-in for your project. In this way, it is crucial to build the skills to effectively communicate the value of the library or your project idea in terms that stakeholders will understand and resonate with. Consider in your circumstance whether they be operational, clinical, educational, research, financial, technical, or other terms.

In addition to understanding your purpose and stakeholders, finding a shared language to tell your story is critical. What better place to start than the shared understanding we have as managers? A 2023 survey conducted by McKinsey found middle managers estimated they spent about 18% of their time on administrative



Fig. 1. Infographic illustrating communication tips for library leaders to effectively engage with stakeholders.

work (5). The universal tasks of resource management, whether that is finance or people, provide a common language to build your justification or pitch. Combined with contextually appropriate data points, using an operationalized framework can help those stakeholders not intimately familiar with the work of libraries better understand what we are providing. For example, calculating a cost-benefit analysis in addition to the overall budget for the project may help the CFO better un-

derstand the impact of the investment. As libraries, we are often awash in data. Using this to show our return on investment, in whatever metric is meaningful to your organization, can show the impact beyond the library (6).

Finally, consider what your senior-leader stakeholder really needs to know. Reports and proposals contain executive summaries for a reason! Consider how to make your ask concise and meaningful. Research has shown that both managers, and particularly those in executive positions, are at high risk for information overload (7). Be clear about your main points, organize them in a way that is memorable (there are many great frameworks out there!), and be prepared with additional information when and if it is requested.

Parting thoughts

In conclusion, crafting communication that resonates with stakeholders is essential for meaningful connections and successful partnerships. Begin by identifying your why – the core purpose driving your initiative. Next, understand your stakeholders and their motivations, aligning these with your objectives to find common ground. Use evidence and data to substantiate your points, ensuring your proposals are grounded in solid research. Complement this with an emotional appeal or a compelling story to create a shared vision that inspires and unites. These skills can be honed through practice (*Figure 1*), ultimately leading to stronger collaborations and more impactful outcomes. By mastering these techniques, you can effectively engage stakeholders, secure buy-in, and drive your projects forward with confidence and clarity.

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